

THE MAKING OF MONSTERS
HAS THE MEDIEVAL MONSTER BEEN REASSEMBLED AS THE UNBOUNDED BODY
OF MEDICAL SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL HORROR?

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Declaration of Originality

I,

(Beverley Anne Bruen) hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.

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ABSTRACT

This investigation examines perceptions of the monster as an unbounded body. Bodily containment is clearly disregarded in the fearsome physical abnormality of the medieval monster. Their hybrid physiologies and the emphasis on bodily orifices are reminiscent of those horrors described in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. My research argues that the monster continues to retain its impact as a metaphor for fear and horror of unforeseen dangers in contemporary secular circumstances.

My studio practice addresses the unbounded body of the monster as a metaphor for environmental horror. An accompanying exegesis documents the methodology, experimentation and ideas that drove this practical research. In the resultant works the monster is presented as an elusive entity embedded within abstracted land forms and in small assemblages of found objects.

My dissertation provides theoretical and historical links to my studio practice. It clarifies the significance of the tradition of medieval mapmaking in addressing the fears and horrors of the unknown by ordering connections between nature, theology and the workings of the cosmos.¹ More specifically, the dissertation contrasts the shift from the monsters of medieval religion to their reconfiguration as an increasingly scientific/medical phenomenon culminating in the genetically altered bodies of today's biotechnologies.

Recollecting the body/earth metaphor of the medieval Hereford *mappa mundi*, ten digital images record my journey through drought-stricken landscapes where the earth is conceptualised as a fragile body, vulnerable to environmental disaster. The medieval need to confine the monster to its rightful place in the mapped schema of God's 'plan of creation' is also reflected in the series of

¹ Naomi Reed Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2001) 82, 98

assemblages of found objects – bones, feathers, fur, mummified frogs, small lizards, cicadas, pig, goat, kangaroo and wombat skulls, metal objects and silk constructions – that are skewered on ancient medical, optical and mathematical instruments. The making or transforming of monsters and the containment of these unbounded bodies is alluded to by safely confining each little assemblage within a miniature glass tower. Grouped together, they recall the eclectic wonderment of the ‘cabinet of curiosities’ or *Kunstammer* and *Wunderkammer* that encapsulated the emerging ethos of medical and scientific enquiry of Enlightenment Europe.

Technically, I contribute to new knowledge in art practice by layering elements of my drawings and scanned found objects in Photoshop to create a painterly abstraction and in the employment of the new technologies of direct digital print to transfer these images onto silk fabric and archival papers. By further embellishing the silk prints with beads and stitching, I demonstrate the interaction of handmaking with digital processes: a multilayered method akin to collage and assemblage. This process of assemblage links the landscape pieces to the small glass towers.

My investigations found that, although its appearance may differ from that of the medieval grotesque, the monster is undiminished as a metaphor for the unbounded body of medical science and environmental horror. The resulting body of work is to be exhibited at the ANU School of Art Gallery from 16 March to 1 April, 2011.

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INTRODUCTION

Out of the bewilderment surrounding intense dread emerge monsters. In this investigation, I liken these most bothersome of entities to Julia Kristeva's definition of the abject. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* she defines the abject as subversive, monstrosly hovering

*...on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or barely so double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.*¹

This quotation encapsulates the themes that run through my research: the unbounded body, the fragility and dangers of borderlines, the disintegration of identity and the exploitation of the animal in the imagery of horror. The consequence of abject horror is a sensation of nauseating disorientation associated with the grotesque hallucinations of psychosis and the ultimate threat of surrender to the primal, instinctual animal within.

I have framed my dissertation in two parts. In Part I, *The Making of Monsters*, I investigate the philosophical significance of the monster in medieval ecclesiastical iconography, and speculate on hybridity and ambiguity as critical components in establishing the physiology of the medieval monster. Evidence of the symbiotic relationship between abjection and the monstrous is also gathered. Part II, *The Monster Transformed*, traces the transformation of the monster from imagery originating in the intense religious fervour of medieval times to today's secular and scientific view of the world. Within each of these parts, I organise my chapters to reflect the great medieval tradition of mapmaking which attempted to impose order on the cosmos and clarify God's plan of Creation by implementing a schema of concentric circles delineating the transition between earthly life, death and the afterlife. Both parts of my dissertation include a chapter on each of these spheres.

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). 207

Ironically, the impetus to impose order also creates borderlines and boundaries which as Kristeva warned are themselves linked to fears of unforeseen dangers and treachery. The abject that '*does not respect borders, positions, rules*' is the '*in-between, the ambiguous; the composite*' that threatens to undermine the premise of embodied stability.²

In *The Making of Monsters*, I trace how medieval ecclesiastical thought relegates monstrous races and bizarre animals to dangerous liminal territories of change and transformation at the far reaches of the earth, while a cadaverous caricature of Death dances amongst the living and hideous demons horribly torment saint and sinner alike. To the medieval mind the existence of monsters was irrefutable.

In these chapters I investigate the monster in the work of Hieronymous Bosch, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Matthias Grünewald and Albrecht Dürer. They interpret the monstrous through hybridity, scrambling the body parts of humans, animals and plants. These monsters evolve from but insistently warp the natural world. Improbable and impossible conceptual beings, gargoyles and grotesques, fiends and monsters transgress the boundaries of established taxonomies in nature. By depicting the monster as essentially animal-like, the animal itself is inevitably maligned. In medieval theology, metamorphosis is distrusted as deviant anomaly. Nature is transformed into a fearful malignant wilderness, habitat of the monstrous.

The vile corporeality of the demonic body emphasizes the sites of abjection, those bodily orifices from which repugnant fluids might leak or be absorbed. It conjures fearful hallucinations of shapeshifting, demonic possession and so-called animalistic appetites. By definition, the monster is an unnatural aberration and its form and function can fluctuate in response to the circumstance for which it is invoked.

² Ibid. 4

In the secular world depicted in *The Monster Transformed*, the diseased, deformed or decaying body is itself perceived as monstrous, a grotesque that defies taxonomic integrity. This unbounded body personifies the horror of the abject. Like the demonic monsters of medieval religion, its betrayal of bodily containment is exposed in orifices that ooze bodily fluids and in distortions of normal body parts. For Kristeva, subjective autonomy is under constant bombardment from the body's physicality: bodily waste, decay, wounds, disease and, ultimately, the separation of birth and the loss of identity in death. Revolted and disgusted by its body, the subject is compelled to reject its own self. By ejecting what was part of 'self,' projecting it into the domain of 'other,' the edges of identity are blurred. The borderline between self and other has been breached and, in the confusion, neurosis and psychosis surfaces.



Joel-Peter Witkin, *Collector of Fluids*, 1982
Toned silver gelatine print
New Mexico

The horror of transgressing this border appears to have afflicted the nude amputee in Joel-Peter Witkin's *Collector of Fluids* (Introduction Plate) who is

fixated on stoppering all orifices from which bodily fluids might leak. Witkin poses deformed, mutilated and cadaverous bodies in elaborate photographic tableaux referencing well-known works of art. We are lured to gaze voyeuristically upon abnormal and abject bodies and in turn to suffer abject guilt for the repulsion we experience. In *The Monster Transformed* Witkin's photography is investigated as an example of the threat to the 'clean and proper body' posed by the abject.³

Discomfort with the abnormal body of deformity, disease and death is alleviated by scrutinising, analysing and trying to control it by surgical and chemical intervention. The final chapter of *The Monster Transformed* investigates recent research in genetic manipulation and transplantation surgery that addresses the scarcity of human body parts by sourcing organs, cells and tissues from animal donors.⁴ Xenotransplantation, as the transfer of body parts between members of different species is known, raises the spectre of human beings whose bodies are monstrously intermingled with the animal. In order to minimise the possibility of rejection following xenotransplantation, successful scientific experiments have been conducted that introduce human genes and embryonic stem cells into animal embryos.

The creatures bred from this procedure are called chimeras, named after the hybrid beast of Greek mythology. The ethical and environmental consequences of tampering with species integrity are investigated in this context by referring to Patricia Piccinini's series of sculptural works inspired by the genetically modified

³ Ibid. 102

⁴ Susanne Lundin, "Creating Identity with Biotechnology: The Xenotransplanted Body as the Norm," *Public Understanding of Science* 11, no. 4 (2002).; Megan Sykes, Anthony d'Apice, and Mauro Sandrin, "The Ethics of Xenotransplantation: Position Paper of the Ethics Committee of the International Xenotransplantation Association," *Xenotransplantation* 10, no. 3 (2003).; Megan Sykes, Anthony d'Apice and Munro Sandrin. "The Ethics of Xenotransplantation: Position Paper of the Ethics Committee of the International Xenotransplantation Association." *Xenotransplantation* 10, no. 3 (2003) 194-203

chimera. Modelled in silicone and acrylic resin, her chimeric creatures appear incredibly lifelike but they are, nevertheless, simulations as bizarre and imaginary as the metamorphosing hybrids of medieval imaginings.

The interspecies chimera, on the other hand, brings to life the metamorphosing hybrids of medieval imaginings. Neither one species nor another, they contradict the rules and taxonomic limits of what we consider to be the norm or natural order of things. Chimeras are profoundly unnatural, arguably living, breathing monsters that manifest abjection, the '*double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject*' horror of Kristeva's theory.

Monsters are capable of encroachment upon our earthly existence, our death and whatever concept informs an afterlife. From the medieval to the medical, the monster beguiles and beckons. It dwells in fantasy and nightmare, in religious mania and scientific rationalism. Monsters are always dangerous, enthralling in their abhorrent appearance and repellent in their abject violation of the order of things. As manifestation of our nameless fears and subterranean horrors, monsters instil disgust and dread. As Colin Milburn warns, monsters are liminal beings that

*...once unleashed, have a terrible life of their own, and caution must be exercised in their creation. Monsters have enormous promise, but be watchful . . . They bite.*⁵

⁵ Colin Nazhone Milburn, "Monsters in Eden: Darwin and Derrida," *MLN* 118, no. 3 (2003). 621

PART ONE

The Making of Monsters: abject horror, fear and medieval hybrids



Plate 1: 1 *The Hereford mappa mundi*, ca 1290
Sheet of Vellum (1.58 x 1.33 metres) supported by an oak frame
Hereford Cathedral, Herefordshire, UK

Chapter I

Mapping Monsters: the geographical-teratological tradition

The grotesque otherness of the monster's unbounded, unresolved body corresponds to Kristeva's definition of abjection as that which '*disturbs identity, system, order*' and "*does not respect borders, positions, rules*."⁶ The monster threatens to undermine the premise of embodied stability. As Colin Milburn observes:

*Monsters, denizens of the borderland, have always represented the extremities of transgression and the limits of the order of things.*⁷

The medieval world appears to have been profoundly anxious about the monstrous. Both the unbounded singularity of 'anomalous birth' and the visual representation of demonic aberration are calculated as deviations from natural law, that is, God's plan of Creation. The medieval strategy was to master the chaotic forces by mapping and demarcating boundaries. The great world maps, the *mappae mundi*, are seminal in demonstrating medieval cosmological connections between nature, theology and the workings of the cosmos.

In this chapter I begin by exploring the *Hereford mappa mundi*, an extant example of a world map from Hereford Cathedral in England. (Plate 1: 1) It functions as a paradigm containing information suggesting that medieval peoples sought to make sense of the inexplicable: to impose a system and an order that would make the conceptual concrete. From there I proceed to explore the earthly sphere of the map. The medieval mind conceived of whole races of humanoid monsters and outlandish animal hybrids that they believed to be natural phenomena living in the uncharted extremities of the earth.⁸ Their strategy for dealing with these unfamiliar others was to banish them to the margins of the earth.

⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 4

⁷ Colin Nazhorne Milburn, "Monsters in Eden: Darwin and Derrida " *MLN*, John Hopkins University Press 118, no. 3 (2003).603

⁸ Naomi Reed Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2001). As the thesis unfolds I discuss the *mappae mundi* in

More complex than a straightforward geographical document, the *mappae mundi* belonged to a European-Christian cartographic tradition whereby the map served as a ‘*medieval container of concepts made visual*’.⁹ Its purpose was to convey a wide variety of spiritual, ethical, and scholarly information. As Laura Smoller affirms in her essay *Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography: Plague and the Investigation of the Apocalypse*, on *mappae mundi* the orb of the earth was intended to reveal God’s plan of salvation:

*Any time one mapped events on the earth, one was fitting them into a geography and a chronology put in place by the Creator. Place, time, and event all had eschatological meaning.*¹⁰

On the *Hereford mappa mundi* the initials M-O-R-S, Death, are contained within the narrow space between two concentric circles representing the border between earthly matters and the realm of the spiritual.¹¹ In a quest to map the specific hierarchical order of all the beings of the earth and the heavens in relation to their concept of God, the circle acquires symbolic significance.¹² The

relation to medieval perceptions of deformity. Naomi Reed Kline’s definitive study is critical to this analysis.

⁹ Ibid. 5

¹⁰ Laura A Smoller, “Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography: Plague and the Investigation of the Apocalypse” in *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul H. Freedman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

183. Smoller’s principal argument is that for 13th and 14th century commentators the eschatological signs and portents that were considered to be precursors to the outbreak of plague blurred the distinction between natural phenomenon and supernatural apocalyptic predictions from the Scriptures.

¹¹ Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm*. 179; See also Naomi Reed Kline, *A Wheel of Memory: The Hereford Mappamundi* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). CD-ROM

¹² Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm*. 13-14 This simple geometric shape, the circle, separates the heaven and earth, the sacred and secular, and the spiritual and the profane. The axis of the circle provided points to indicate alignment of the cardinal points of the compass, the four elements (earth, water, air, and fire), the winds that blew from the heavens onto

circle's circumference, without beginning or end, equates to eternity and creates a border between the inner space of quantifiable measurement and the infinity of space beyond this border. In medieval manuscripts it is not uncommon for God the Creator to be revealed, compass in hand, about to inscribe the circle which will describe the earth.¹³

The earthly sphere of the map is teeming with both written and illustrated detail about natural history, myth and legend as it was understood at the time. As Jerusalem was perceived to be the centre of medieval Christendom it was located at the nucleus of the Christian map with the rest of the world radiating outwards. Farther from the familiar centre, comfortable certainty progressively gives way to ambiguity and the insecurity of the irrational. The closer the proximity to the edges of the circle's circumference the more plausible it is to imagine that these places are where the animal begins to metamorphose into incredible hybrid forms and grotesque mutations. As distinguished on the map, the probable and improbable intermingle.

the earth, the four humours affecting health and well-being (choler, phlegm, black bile and blood) and a position at the apex to indicate the supremacy of God. The medieval approach to map-making epitomises this schematisation. Kline later goes on to claim that the rose window was the 'supreme embodiment' of this symbolism. 34-5

¹³ Ibid. 10 Kline provides several illustrated examples: Fig. 1.1 *The Creation, God as Architect*, *Bible moralisée*, Vienna 11; Fig.4.8 *The Creator of Heaven and Earth*, Alnwick Bestiary, 120; Fig.4.11 *God with Compass and the Fall of the Rebel Angels*, Queen Mary Salter, London 125; Fig. 4.14 *God Creating with Compass, with Heaven and Hell*, Holkham Picture Book, London 129; Fig.8.7 *The Creation (God as Architect)*, *Bible moralisée*, Oxford, 235



Plate 1: 2
***Monstrous Races*, Von Megenburg,**
***Puch der Natur*, 282v. Augsburg printed 1475**
McGill University, Blacker-Wood Library

The authors of the map give assiduous attention to locating and illustrating those populations of monstrous peoples and bizarre animals that occupy the outer reaches of the medieval world. Explicit descriptions of their strange customs and likenesses attest to the degree of medieval assuredness that such bizarre creatures actually existed on earth. Many of the giants, pygmies, hermaphrodites, dog-headed men, four-eyed Ethiopian Marmini, headless Blemyae whose faces appeared on their chests, 'wicked' Sciopodes who walked on a single leg and other strange humanoid beings were entrenched in medieval lore.¹⁴ Numerous illustrations of these weird individuals are detailed in the literature of the time including the *Buch der Natur* (Book of Nature) of Konrad Von Megenburg (1309-1374) (Plate 1: 2).¹⁵

In her study of the Hereford map, Naomi Reed Kline also distinguishes 43

¹⁴ Ibid. 148-153

¹⁵ Rudolf Wittkower, "Marvels of the East. A Study in the History of Monsters," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* Vol 5 (1942).159-227

identifications and textual references to animals.¹⁶ The characteristics and habits attributed to exotic creatures – that is, exotic to the Christian peoples of the European world – like the elephant, camel, rhinoceros, leopard, lion, buffalo, bear, scorpion, genet, ape, ostrich, lynx, crocodile, lizard, parrot or the pelican, are inventive fictions rather than natural history. Animals were useful as literary metaphor, invoking the moral didacticism that the Church fathers wanted to convey to a predominantly illiterate congregation. Information regarding the animals' likenesses and habits was gathered from the classical texts of Pliny, Herodotus and Solinus, while the allegorical readings of the bestiaries provided a means to reinterpret these strange foreign beasts from distant lands into a Christian context.¹⁷

These were the creatures of fable and parable derived from both pagan and Christian descriptions considered relevant to the map's underlying theme of Creation. The eccentric hybrids familiar from mythology – faun, sphinx, mermaid, and minotaur – and the stranger beasts from Bestiary folklore – dragon, phoenix, satyr, unicorn, manticore, alerion, yale, salamander, mandrake, basilisk, griffin, and bonnacon – are interpreted with matter-of-fact notes and explanations.¹⁸



Plate 1: 3 Yale
From the *Hereford Mappae mundi*
13th Century

¹⁶ Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm*. 102; See also a key to the location and inscriptions associated with the animals. 94-7

¹⁷ Ibid. 98

¹⁸ Ibid. 109

The Yale (Plate 1: 3), for instance, had been described by Solinus as a true hybrid:

...the yale is born in India, with a horse's body, an elephant's tail, black in colour, with a goat's jaws, bearing horns more than a cubit in length; they are not stiff, but move as use in fight demands; it fights with one and folds the other back.¹⁹



Plate 1: 4
Manticore (Martikhora)
From the *Hereford Mappae Mundi*
13th Century

The manticore (Plate 1: 4) is also a supposed inhabitant of the mysterious region of India and is said to possess a

...threefold series of teeth, the face of a man, gray eyes, bloody in colour, with a lion's body, the tail of a scorpion and a whistling voice.²⁰

This creature raised considerable concern for medieval minds: if the monster possessed the head of a human being – thereby revealing a capacity to reason – was this creature to be considered human despite its bestial body?²¹ Of more obscure provenance are the marsok or transforming beast, cirenus bird, and the tigolopes.²² Scatological attributes are also stated among the interesting facts

¹⁹ Ibid. 95

²⁰ Ibid. footnote 13, 102

²¹ Joyce E Salisbury, "Human Beasts and Bestial Humans," in *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*, ed. Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior (Routledge 1997). 11

²² Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm*. 107-112, footnote 32

about the creatures, with the bonnacon emitting fiery dung and the lynx urinating stones.²³

Following in the written and oral tradition of the pseudo-scientific bestiary, the animals of the Heresford map are understood as matter-of-fact, flesh and blood creatures with their feet planted firmly on earth. The Latin texts relate intriguing bits of information and strengthen the illusion of natural history and scientific fact. While the map authenticates their physical existence and earthly lives, these bizarre animals and monstrous peoples were not portrayed on the map as terrifying supernatural beings. These monsters were tolerable because they only existed outside, over there, at the margins of the world. At a safe distance, the exotic and bizarre creatures delivered moral lessons in an engaging manner, illustrating and reinforcing the symbolic and meaningful nature of all Creation.

The geography of the earth as described within the Hereford map is without reference to any realistic scale or recognisable distance. Such mundane calculation was apparently of secondary importance to locating these strange, unique or fabulous creatures in a schema that embellished and intensified wonderment at God's creation. It is not the creatures in themselves that were fearsome but the actual unknown itself. Naomi Kline succinctly summarizes the need to contain these weird and hybrid inhabitants with their physical deformities and peculiar habits within ordered confines:

Each text, each image informs and dispels a fear of the unknown and replaces it with authoritative evidence, and the limited number of spatial interstices dispel the horror of the vacuum ('horror vacui'). The idea of the map was to fill the spaces, to prove that the world was contained within the framework of Creation, Judgment, and Redemption.²⁴

²³ Ibid. 103

²⁴ Ibid. 47-8



Plate 1: 5 Marginalia
Fitz.f.55v



Plate 1: 6
Animal and scatological marginalia

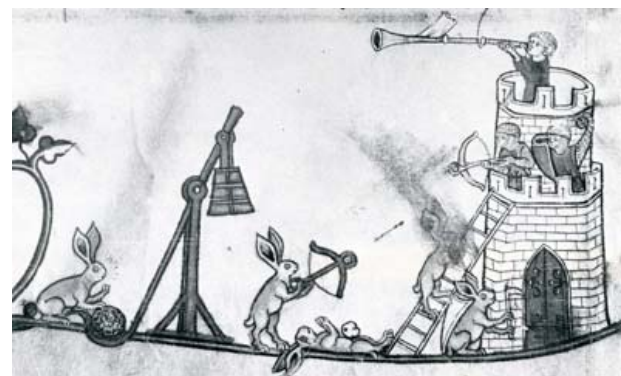


Plate 1: 7 Men defending their castle against rabbits
Fitz. 298, f. 41

The creatures of these spaces were not confined to maps alone. They emerge from the wooden underbellies of misericordia, from the stone carvings of cathedral walls, or perhaps the most perplexing of all, from within the margins of illuminated manuscripts. (Plate 1: 5) Here the sciopod, the gryllus or other peculiar creatures were not banished to the outer edges of a great map or scattered around the spatial extremities of a vast cathedral, but were presented in blunt juxtaposition with the solemn devotional content occupying the main body of the page. The circle, which played such a significant part in conveying the perception of conceptual space, is supplanted by the rigid geometry of the page's rectangle. The misshapen anomalies of distant monstrous peoples, nude figures with exposed genitalia or buttocks, men and women copulating, scatological

scenes of defecation and urination, and animals both natural and fabled are butted abruptly up against the holy word of God. (Plate 1: 6, Plate 1: 7)

This does not mean that there was any confusion about the spatial relationship between the sacred and the profane. Whereas the geographic schema of the great maps were meant to *explain* the existence and *locate* anomalous peoples and animals at the edges of the earth, grotesque bodies are paradoxically free to frolic in intimate books like bibles and psalters but only as long as they are contained within the margins. Marginalia, as these characters came to be known, are restricted to the edge of the page. This, however, does not explain why they were considered appropriate to religious texts at all. The perplexing quandary of the role of this imagery in medieval thinking is variously explored by medieval historians such as Michael Camille, Mikhail Bakhtin, Ruth Mellinkoff and David Williams.

In marginalia, familiar animals such as foxes, cats, dogs, rabbits, cattle, sheep and birds – thought to be shapes that the devil and demons might assume - mingle with the iconography of monsters, dragons, monkeys, lions, and other creatures real and imaginary.²⁵ Animals engage in frankly human activity – playing musical instruments, participating in battle scenes or ecclesiastical ceremonies, and the like – as well as sexual and scatological acts, often with apparent exuberance, whimsy and humour.

It is tempting, as a modern day observer, to associate their scatological habits and grotesque bodies with the filth and depravity of the abject. But our reaction may be coloured by our own cultural perceptions. As Michael Camille convinces us in *Image on the Edge*, medieval people would not be fazed by such horrors as faecal matter:

Shit had its proper place in the scheme of things. Not yet a secret secretion, it ran down the middle of the streets, its odours omnipresent. As

²⁵ Ruth Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: Ruth Mellinkoff, 2004). 73

*manure it was part of the cycle of life, death and rebirth, and as everyday matter it found its way onto the pages of prayer-books.*²⁶

Here we are reminded of the popular-festive laughter which Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* claimed could turn the world on its head: a '*thrust downward into the bowels of the earth, into the depths of the human body*'.²⁷

Bakhtin distinguishes what he believes to be the dichotomy of medieval life: the official stance of an ecclesiastical and feudal culture, serious and pious, and the carnivalesque festivities of folk humour. The idiosyncrasies, absurd parodies and profanations of carnival energised the bodily lower stratum which, he argues, produced the ever-changing, unfinished body of grotesque realism.²⁸ In carnival, the sites of the body from which revolting and disgusting excretions might leak, where the body was vulnerable to the abject, are exuberantly celebrated:

*...the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, and the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, child-birth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at a point where they enter into each other.*²⁹

As did Bakhtin, Michael Camille observes that the permutations of the monster provided limitless possibilities for '*resisting, ridiculing, overturning and inverting*' the rigidly structured and hierarchical medieval world.³⁰ Furthermore, he maintains, the people enjoyed ambiguous interplay between the sacred and

²⁶ Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art, Essays in Art and Culture*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992). 111

²⁷ M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1st Midland book ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).370

²⁸ Ibid. 19

²⁹ Ibid. 26

³⁰ Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. 26

profane, the spiritual and worldly using *'travesty, profanation and sacrilege'* as essential communicators of the sacred within society.³¹

As the carnival existed as counterpoint to serious piety, so too could the inventiveness of medieval culture allow folk humour to permeate other art forms. Connections are made between medieval iconography and bodily orifices. The mouth's significance was as a site of expulsion (such as of the soul after death), of communication (manuscripts were meant to be spoken aloud) and ingress (partaking of food).³² Camille observes that elaborate twelfth-century manuscript initials:

*...allude to the bite, the chew or the swallow. Dragons, humans, mermaids, fishes eat all kinds of things; vegetables and animals are not simply jumbled together but actually bite and digest one another, sometimes even themselves, in spiralling orgies of autophagia.*³³

The gargoyles spouting water from cathedral gutters were indeed *'all body and no soul – a pure projector of filth, the opposite of the angel whose body is weightless and orifice-less'*.³⁴ The disembodied gryllus (Plate 1: 5), literally a head on legs where the head substituted for the sexual organs, spoke of that other appetite, lust.³⁵ Likewise, he considers that a monastic audience would have linked the *'slithering things coiling around the letters'* with *'embodiments of alimentary codes and taboos'*.³⁶ Camille also emphasizes that the fixation on bodily orifices was equally pertinent to the medieval mind set. However, he suggests this translates into fear of liminal zones, points of access to or egress from body or building, which are always vulnerable to demonic invasion and must be protected.³⁷

³¹ Ibid. 29

³² Ibid. 134

³³ Ibid. 64

³⁴ Ibid. 78

³⁵ Ibid. 37 See Plate 1: 4 for medieval people the gryllus came to represent the baser bodily instincts, or 'how the soul of desiring man had become a prisoner of the beast'.

³⁶ Ibid. 73

³⁷ Ibid. 16

Camille takes issue, however, with Bakhtin's emphasis on an impenetrable division between official church and folk culture and argues that the division between sacred and profane was more ambiguous during the Middle Ages.³⁸ He argues against the utopian nostalgia of Bakhtin's assertion that carnival represented a counter-cultural resistance by the common people against the official order. Carnivals were held in a public square or market place – well within the sphere of civic regulation. Camille emphasizes that:

*Often licensed by the civic authorities, all the inversion, cross-dressing, riotous drinking and parodic performance at carnival time...[that] looks at first like unfettered freedom of expression often served to legitimate the status quo, chastising the weaker groups in the social order, such as women and ethnic and social minorities.*³⁹

He likens the images of the manuscript's margins to the carnival in that both were complicit *'with the official order, even while playing out in the supposed subversion of it'*.⁴⁰

The intended audience for the ambiguous monsters of medieval art remains contentious. Camille situates his medieval reader *'neither outside nor inside, but in-between, on the edge'*.⁴¹ From a position of liminality the medieval reader is open to concepts of transformation, hybridity, and irrationality. Although there probably is an element of didacticism, the significance of the grotesque is more complex than a moralising warning against earthly sin. In *Averting Demons*, Ruth Mellinkoff contends that the audience for which the monstrous creatures were intended is other demons.

...not for clerics, not for lay viewers, and not for patrons. They were meant to dispel the armies of demons that in those times virtually everyone

³⁸ Ibid. 143

³⁹ Ibid. 143

⁴⁰ Ibid. 143

⁴¹ Ibid. 14

*believed to lurk everywhere, awaiting opportunities to do every manner of harm.*⁴²

She bases her argument on the demonic images on amulets or talismans that she believes were carried by pilgrims to the Crusades. She argues that the image of the monster was to avert evil by frightening demons away with what is most feared, the demonic itself: using *'like to banish like,' 'fire to fight fire'*.⁴³ Frequently obscured from human view – *'below on misericords, high on roof bosses, corbels, and gargoyles, and concealed inside tall towers'* – grotesque images were intrinsically frightening, so what better image to banish a demonic intruder.⁴⁴

Camille determines that the monstrous image spoke to lay and cleric alike to define where they stood in relation to *'those always imminent "others"'*, the demonic hordes that Mellinkoff describes.⁴⁵ He does, however, confirm the protective abilities of the monstrous through an analysis of the external carvings of the twelfth-century monastic church of St Pierre at Aulnay-de-Saintonge. He describes a procession of animals, *'clawing and biting at each other ... legs, paws, claws, talons, tiptoes and slimy undersides'* that parade from east to west above the southern doorway.⁴⁶ They offer *'both a locus of protection and one of fascination (meaning to be bewitched by a demon or demonic gaze)'*.⁴⁷

Camille draws an analogy between the church's architectural organisation and the medieval fixation on bodily orifices. Openings, whether of the body or the architectural entrances, doorways and windows of a building, were to be feared because they represented sites where evil could invade or be expelled. These liminal zones needed to be protected by

⁴² Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons*. 41

⁴³ Ibid. 145

⁴⁴ Ibid. 41-2

⁴⁵ Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. 75

⁴⁶ Ibid. 66

⁴⁷ Ibid. 75

...a noxious cartledge — infested, crawling with legions of slimy and furry vermin on its corbels, window splays and corners, and sprouting from shadowy corbels.⁴⁸

These monstrous creatures were in the process of metamorphosing from human to animal, confusing the distinction between species and creating an ambiguity that served to illustrate a realm of otherness at the edges of things. The exterior walls of the church did not constitute a sacred space but rather a protective membrane guarding the sacred interior from the abhorrent presence of ungodly chaos.

In *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature*, David Williams identifies two forms of allegory in the teratological imagery of medieval thought. There is one that derives its images from nature and history such as the literal monsters of the *mappae mundi* and a second, purely spiritual discourse that contradicts, deforms, and transcends nature and mundane reality:

...as "literal" sign the monster refers to the geographical-teratological tradition and indicates a member of those races inhabiting far-off regions of the earth, flesh and blood creatures understood to exist physically...As figurative sign, or metaphor, used outside the geographical tradition, the monster carries with it an ambiguity more extreme than other figura because, in fact, it refers to nothing phenomenally real, nothing that physical nature confirms or authorizes.⁴⁹

The monster of this deformed discourse is apophatic; an instrument of negative theology revealing the transcendence of God through describing what he is not. Bodily abnormality may be absorbed within the social order, albeit by ostracising such aberrations to far distant regions, but as signifiers in apophatic discourse monsters become subversive and transgressive. The apophatic monster, while not the subject of this chapter which deals with the earthly phenomenon, requires

⁴⁸ Ibid. 72

⁴⁹ David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996). 12

further investigation and I will return to it in my third chapter, *Transgressing the Boundaries: beyond death*.

Underlying the various views on the depiction of hybrid animals and mythical creatures in medieval art is the observation of a desire to instil or dispel the horror of otherness by depicting it as a monster and relegating it to the periphery of society. This segregation of the monstrous 'other' is, however, subject to its own vulnerabilities. An illustration of this prospect is argued by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. They imply that in any culture there is a constant and animated dialogue between the periphery and centre, the marginalized and the majority. The resultant dialectic, they argue, presents as a mixing of inversion, demonization (meaning exclusion in their context) and a more complex form of the grotesque, hybridization. They distinguish the grotesque as the alien 'other' of the defining group or self and

*...the grotesque as a boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which self and other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone... The very attempt to demarcate boundaries, to unite and purify the social collectivity results in "a complex hybrid fantasy."*⁵⁰

Borders, margins and edges, they argue, are sites of the 'most powerful symbolic repertoires' where established order and hierarchies are at their most vulnerable.⁵¹

The medieval church was particularly wary of peripheries, edges and borders but felt compelled to master the incomprehensible turmoil of the cosmos by mapping its world and instituting positions and rules. Inevitably, however meticulously codified, categorized or constructed, the symbolic order is inherently vulnerable to its antithesis, the energetic, disorganised, fragmented forces of what Kristeva

⁵⁰ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986). 193

⁵¹ Ibid. 20

called the semiotic.⁵² A volatile, subliminal element which interacts dialectically with regulated rules, limits and definitions, the archaic semiotic can transgress its boundaries, opening a door for unnatural forces and aberrant life forms to energise the underlying static geometrical schema of a prosaically mapped space.

As Camille unravels in the menaces of the liminal:

*If these edges were dangerous, they were also powerful places. In folklore, betwixt and between are important zones of transformation. The edge of the water was where wisdom revealed itself; spirits were banished to the spaceless places 'between the froth and the water' or 'betwixt the bark and the tree'. Similarly, temporal junctures between winter and summer, or between night and day, were dangerous moments of intersection with the Otherworld. In charms and riddles, things that were neither this nor that bore, in their defiance of classification, strong magic.*⁵³

The exotic animals, monstrous races and boundless array of hybrid creatures were tolerable when they occupied the edges of marginalia or map from where they could indulge in parody, caricature and satire with the grotesque exuberance of carnival. In medieval culture, as we are reminded by Camille, ambiguity was enjoyed and the profane reinforced the lessons of the sacred. In medieval manuscripts the grotesque antics of the margins might challenge but never totally undermine the text.⁵⁴ Nor do these grotesques disturb identity, system or order when they are incorporated within the logic of God's plan of Creation. In magical peripheries solemn sanctity may well consent to a space for the in-between, ambiguous or composite other. Grotesque bodies and scatological habits are not in themselves qualify as the loathsome abject.

Nevertheless, the uneasiness that manifests on the edge is inherent within these creatures. Edges and borders are treacherous places. On the *Hereford mappa mundi* death is in dangerous proximity to the borders of the earthly sphere. In my

⁵² Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). 49

⁵³ Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. 16

⁵⁴ Ibid. 10

next chapter I search this narrow wheel of M-O-R-S, death, for evidence of the abject in an era of plague and pestilence. I consider the curious personification of Death and its associated symbolism in religious works of art at a time when death is horrifyingly apparent, the late medieval period.

Chapter II

M.O.R.S: death personified

In the last chapter I traced the shrewd tactic of relegating the monstrous to exile on the mapped edges of the earth and how, in religious manuscripts, marginalia reflected on these inhabitants of liminal regions. In this chapter I explore the precarious region of medieval death and the way in which religious ideology utilises the symbolism of rebirth to negate the finality of death.

On the *Hereford mappa mundi* the narrow wheel of M-O-R-S is ominously empty of all information except the four letters. Isolated in a liminal territory beyond the natural world, its narrow circumference is symbolic of the transition of life to afterlife. The passage of the body through the mapped spheres, from birth's proximity to death, from fertility and growth to degeneration and putrescence, is commemorated in symbolic images.



Plate 2: 1
Hans J Sebald Beham, *Allegory of Death*, 1529

In Beham's *Allegory of Death* a newborn sleeps, oblivious to the hourglass whose sands count away his earthly life. (Plate 2: 1) In time, and with inevitable certainty, the flesh will fall from his bones as he too, like the skulls that surround him, will succumb to death. Recalling the words of Ecclesiastes 1: 2, '*vanity of vanities; all is vanity*,' the purpose of the *vanitas* still life painting was to remind its

viewers of the transience of earthly conceits and pleasures.⁵⁵ Life was to be lived in preparation for death and the Day of Judgement. Concomitantly Beham's *Allegory of Death* suggests a cyclic concept of time, equating death with birth and thus continual regeneration.

The body in the process of dying and even more emphatically, in decay following death, generates fearful forebodings. Decomposition is regarded as disgusting; its stench contaminates and pollutes the air. Its literal dissolution metamorphoses a recognisable human into a cadaver, a corpse, a carcass and eventually a bag of bones that is irreconcilable with the living subject.

*The fate of the corpse is to suffer putrescence and formlessness, until only dry bones remain, hard and imperishable.*⁵⁶

Although no one can gaze on his or her own corpse, this physical corruption of the body of another is confirmation of the propinquity of their own death. The corpse is abject, a reminder that despite all emotional denials, the body has been assimilated into the category of the 'other': the collective of the dead.

This most fearful of abject entities challenged the medieval iconographers. Based on the belief that human life was created in the image of God (Genesis 1: 26, 27), medieval people perceived their God to be invincible, omnipotent but, especially in His guise of God the Son, imaginable in familiar human form. It was imperative for Christians to preserve the distinctiveness of human identity. Hence they chose not to personify death with fantastic human-animal hybridity in the manner of the deities of ancient Egypt or Asia. Artisans remained respectful of the doctrine that

⁵⁵ The King James Version of the Bible translation of the Latin Vulgate *Vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas*.

⁵⁶ Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death : The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). 34 They observe that in many cultures there is a custom of secondary burial whereby transformation of the corpse is paramount. "During this period [of transition] the soul of the dead person is homeless and the object of dread. Unable to enter the society of the dead, it must lead a pitiful existence on the fringes of human habitation."

forbade the worshipping of ‘*the likeness of anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth*’ (Exodus 20: 4). In Christianity death is represented as the *transi*, personified as a prosaic human body in the process of decay. Death occurs on earth, amongst the living, which implies that the sphere of M-O-R-S represents a disembodied state situated between the dead body and the blessed soul in paradise or the condemned in hell.⁵⁷



Plate 2: 2

Unknown artist, possibly printed by Heinrich Knobloch, *Doten dantz mit figuren*, Two images of the *Danse Macabre* and *Death and the Maiden* from a series of 38 woodcuts depicting the *danse macabre*, ca. mid-15th century. Heidelberg

Extraordinarily, in the many versions of the *danse macabre* skeletons and cadavers appear quite merry, joyfully kicking up their heels and playing musical instruments. (Plate 2: 2) Death diabolically tempts the living to join him in his dance.⁵⁸ Mocking the mortal dread of ordinary people, he makes light of the precariousness of their hold on life. His capricious delight lies in his ability to randomly pick and choose who will join in his carnivalesque charade. Death in the *danse macabre* is a familiar whose appearance might be seen as more coaxing than terrifying. As Mikhail Bakhtin remarked, this image of death ‘*is more or less a*

⁵⁷ Philippe Ari  s, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1981). 113

⁵⁸ As it is common usage, I will use the masculine pronoun when referring to the personified Death in these works.

funny monstrosity’ whose *‘imaginary uncanniness’* subverts the horror of the real threat of death.⁵⁹

The popularity of woodcuts or engravings of these images suggests that they were meant to be reproduced and circulated amongst the people as a form of didactic tract. The theme is no more than a caution that no-one, rich or poor, old or young, knows when death will call. Dreadful yet fascinating, the moral is that all life suffers the same fate. (Plate 2:3)



Plate 2: 3
Hans Holbein, *Peddler*, from the *Danse Macabre* from the *Liber Chronicarum*,
From a series of 41 woodcuts
Originally published in Lyons in 1538

Despite the sombre message, these images reflect the potentialities of the comic folk element that Bakhtin finds in the writing of Rabelais. The dancing *transi* recall the spontaneous obscenities, festive madness, carnivalesque parodies, comic devils, ludicrous monstrosities and grotesque bodily processes that by dialectic inversion are a means of conquering terror. As Bakhtin insists, catastrophe can be degraded, humanised, and transformed into grotesque parody. *‘All that was terrifying becomes grotesque.’*⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 51

⁶⁰ Ibid. 91



Plate 2: 4
Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death*, ca. 1562
 Oil on panel, 117 x 162cm
 Museo del Prado, Madrid

The character of Death is fundamentally transformed when the emphasis falls on the more sinister persona of Death Triumphant as seen in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's treatment of the subject (Plate 2: 4). Death is a skeletal and merciless scythe-wielding destroyer astride an emaciated pale horse leading his army of skeletons against the living. The battlefield replaces the dance floor. The pale horse links him to the fourth rider of the Apocalypse. After the breaking of the fourth seal, the narrator beholds:

...a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed him. And power was given unto them over the fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth. (Revelation 6: 8)

Behind Death is the hell-fired cauldron. The cauldron, despite its central location, does not dominate the scene and the only depictions of demonic beings are the tiny monsters that cluster around it. The reference is a reminder of the threat that the time of Judgement follows death. Like the words of Revelation 6: 8, the subject matter catalogues many ways human beings might meet their death: genocide, illness, shipwreck, execution, accident or murder.⁶¹ Death comes without warning and without time to be resigned to its inevitability or even prepare for a good death (*artes moriendi*).⁶² There is very little evidence of a quiet exit from advanced age. The lovers in the lower right corner, oblivious to the carnage and their own eventual fate, are the only ones being charmed by gentle music; elsewhere the music is supplied by the battle drums of war and the tolling of mourning bells.



Plate 2: 5 “Plague Victims”
Detail from Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death*, ca.1562

Most compelling amongst this mayhem are foreground figures that bring to mind the horror of the Black Death. (Plate 2: 5)⁶³ For the three hundred year period

⁶¹ Philippe and Françoise Roberts-Jones, *Pieter Bruegel*, trans. Oxford Translate-a-Book, England, 2nd ed. (Harry N Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2002).104

⁶² Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*. 118-9

⁶³ Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death, Medieval Sources Series* (Manchester University Press 1994). 3 The bubonic plague of 1348 was known as the pestilence and not the Black Death until the 16th century. See Caroline Walker Bynum, "Disease and Death in the Middle Ages " *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 9, no. 1 (1985).

since it first occurred in Europe ca.1348, bubonic plague recurred in cycles of five to twelve years. Spread by fleas vacating their dead or dying rat hosts for humans, the death toll from these pandemics was catastrophic.⁶⁴ First described in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the horror and devastation is reiterated in Bruegel's painting.⁶⁵ Whole towns and cities were devastated. Many of the sick were left alone to die excruciating deaths as too few well persons were left to tend them or else those few survivors were too scared to approach the infected.⁶⁶ Mass burial in crude pits became common⁶⁷. Increasingly, corpses lay forsaken in their houses⁶⁸ and, as is graphically suggested in Bruegel's painting (Plate 2: 6), still more bodies lay in the streets and alleys to be gnawed by abandoned cats and dogs.



Plate 2: 6 "Starving dog savages a dead body"
Detail from Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death* c. 1562

The Irish friar John Clyn of Kilkenny, himself an eventual casualty of the unprecedented horror, records the plague's symptoms:

⁶⁴ Horrox, *The Black Death*. 3 The medieval chroniclers of the plague give differing estimates of the dead and the figures they give are themselves so exaggerated as to suggest the authors were overwhelmed with horror and disbelief at the magnitude of disaster. Nevertheless the Black Death is counted among the worst disasters in history with an estimated death toll of one third the population of Europe.

⁶⁵ Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella, *The Decameron* (New York: Norton, 1983).

⁶⁶ Ibid. The PROEM Introduction 028-030

⁶⁷ Ibid. The PROEM Introduction 042

⁶⁸ Ibid. The PROEM Introduction 037

*...many died of boils and abscesses [buboes], and pustules on their shins and under their armpits; others frantic with pain in their head, and others spitting blood.*⁶⁹

For the traumatised populace the proliferation of plague-infected corpses, with their swollen and pus-filled buboes, must have represented what Kristeva described as the '*utmost of abjection*'. For her, the corpse signifies death infecting life:

*It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself from as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons us and ends up engulfing us.*⁷⁰

The fearful apparition of the Black Death might well have aroused a cosmic terror such as Bakhtin maintains is of mythic consequence. Distinct from the fear evident in the struggle '*in the individual body against the memories of an agonizing birth and the fear of the throes of death*,'⁷¹ cosmic terror is:

*The starry sky, the gigantic material masses of the mountains, the sea, the cosmic upheavals, elemental catastrophes—these constitute the terror that pervades ancient mythologies, philosophies, the systems of images, and language itself with its semantics...Even the most ancient images of folklore express the struggle against fear, against the memories of the past, and the apprehension of future calamities.*⁷²

Whereas war and famine were readily attributed to natural causes, the reaction to plague was more ambivalent. In the popular imagination plague generated superstitions and fantastical rumours. In her essay *Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography*, Laura Smoller documents fourteenth-century accounts of phenomenal and strange occurrences before the 1348 outbreak of plague. They tell of tremendous earthquakes, falling stars, stinking mists and rains of fire, hail,

⁶⁹ Ole Jørgen Benedictow, *The Black Death, 1346-1353: The Complete History* (Boydell & Brewer, 2004). 27

⁷⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 4

⁷¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Note 9 p 336

⁷² Ibid.335

frogs, snakes, lizards, scorpions, toads and other 'poisonous' animals.⁷³ The suggestion that events such as these were natural phenomena fades into the phantasmagoria of apocalyptic writing.

*The extraordinary imagery of Revelation encompasses earthquakes, blackened sun and bloodied moon, stars falling from heaven, hail and fire mingled with blood, bloodied seas and dying creatures, poisoned rivers, sulphurous fires from the burning pit.*⁷⁴

Plagues of locusts, for instance, are described in Revelation as

...wearing golden crowns and iron breastplates and with their wings beating like the sound of many horses rushing to war. Their faces are human with women's hair and lions teeth and their tails are like those of scorpions whose stings lasted for five months. (Revelation 9: 7-10)

That these marvellous hybrid creatures could be confused with natural portents of plague become apparent in documents such as that of the episcopal court of Lausanne that reports 'swarms of migratory locusts were in so great numbers as to darken the sun'.⁷⁵ They descend on the already beleaguered people, devouring their crops and gardens and ensuring famine. The putrefying masses of rotting locusts contaminate the water supply, contributing to the horrendous stench filling the 'foul and malignant' air that was held responsible for the spread

⁷³ Laura Smoller, "Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography: Plague and the Investigation of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages" in *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*.156-7

⁷⁴ Laura Smoller, "Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography: Plague and the Investigation of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages" in *Ibid*. An account of devastating earthquake is given by Heinrich of Herford. He cites fire falling from heaven and rains of toads and snakes. 177-182 The Austrian monastery of Neuberg recorded men and beasts being changed into stone through the corruption of the air, a "lethal rain" mixed with pestiferous snakes and worms and a terrible fire in the sky that burned the stones and emitted a contagious and lethal smoke. The latter seems to be associated with the spread of the plague. 156 A letter of Louis Heyligen tells of terrible storms in India causing death from massive hailstones, fetid smoke from heaven and rains of "frogs, snakes, lizards, scorpions, and other poisonous animals." 157

⁷⁵ Peter Dinzelbacher, "Animal Trials: A Multidisciplinary Approach," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32, no. 3 (2002). 408

of the Black Death.⁷⁶ All the terrifying prophecies of destruction, redemption and doom that feature in the culminating book of the Bible are presented as an accurate description of the earth's last days. Bodily death, fearful in itself, was compounded by the mental picture of potential apocalypse and eternal punishment for mortal sin.

The parched earth, fiery sky, ossuary carts of skulls and centrally situated hell-fire that Bruegel created in his *Triumph of Death* have apocalyptic overtones but nevertheless the scene remains on earthly soil. The personification of death conforms to the skeletal clowning found in the *danse macabre* where death 'is more or less a funny monstrosity'.⁷⁷ The dead are mortal; the skeletons are human remains; familiar corpses, not fiends from hell. Similarly, the frogs, snakes, lizards, scorpions and toads that were the portents of plague were, like the skeletons and cadavers personifying death, creatures of an earthly origin. Incongruous as they were, falling from the skies as 'poisonous' rains, they were not fabricated creatures of imagination. As Laura Smoller concludes, to the medieval mind nature was inseparable from theology:

*Once an author began to describe plague with the language of natural philosophy, miasma-generating earthquakes inevitably shaded into apocalyptic earthquakes, and corrupt vapors inside the earth began to look like corrupt enemies within Christendom.*⁷⁸

Hybridity, which characterises the creatures of the Revelation, is in fact reserved for the depiction of demons rather than the human who, dead or alive, is believed to have been created in the image of God.

The bizarre extravagances of apocalyptic imagery are about the horrors and delights of the world's imminent end and call for unearthly transformation. But in

⁷⁶ *ibid* p 32-34

⁷⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 51

⁷⁸ Laura A Smoller, "Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography: Plague and the Investigation of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages." in *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*.183

respect of the narrow sphere of death as inscribed on the *mappae mundi*, Judgement Day has yet to arrive and with it all the permutations of hybridity as a manifestation of evil. The mortal has to be reimagined as an immortal; the terrain of secular earth has to be differentiated from the sacred sphere of heaven and the abominable topography of hell. Satan and his fiends must be personified as monstrous, hideous tormentors.

When the theologian, Martin Luther, blamed the plague on demons and malevolent spirits that '*poisoned the air or otherwise infected the poor people by their breath and injected mortal poison into human bodies,*' he stepped beyond the border of death into the world of apocalyptic nightmare.⁷⁹ Satan and his demons can only be portrayed as more fearful than death itself. In the next chapter I confront this awesome territory beyond death where anthropomorphisation, distortion and hybridisation of animal forms conjure the monster as inhabitants of the ephemeral notion of a heaven or the abject horror of hell.

⁷⁹ Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994). 59

Chapter III

Transgressing the Boundaries



Plate 3: 1

Albrecht Dürer, *The Knight, Death and the Devil*, 1513

Engraving, 24.6 x 19cm

The British Museum

On medieval *mappae mundi* or in the margins of illuminated manuscripts curious creatures are believed (rightly or wrongly) to inhabit the earth. Visually, death is personified as a vengeful warrior astride an apocalyptic pale horse (Revelation 6:8) or, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggested, a ‘funny monstrosity’ in a *danse macabre*.⁸⁰ Death appears as a cadaver or skeleton, a human construct, not a supernatural being. These grotesques were thus contained within the two circles of earth and death (M-O-R-S) on the mapped world of the *Hereford mappa mundi*. Beyond the literal, earthly world and the liminal territory of death lay the uncharted regions and dangerous sites of the final Judgement and the landscapes of heaven and hell. In this chapter I investigate this mystical realm and the heavenly and diabolical beings that reveal themselves in ecclesiastical art as seething animal forms that combine and hybridise as they evolve into the monstrous.

Albrecht Dürer’s engraving, *Knight, Death and the Devil* (Plate 3: 1), restates the geographic schema through the characters who personify the three states that permeated the realms of the *mappae mundi*: the knight, earthly life; the cadaver, Death; and the afterlife, the Devil. While the knight stares resolutely forward ignoring the cadaverous figure of Death astride his pale horse, the Devil lingers behind him eagerly awaiting his soul. Death is unable to catch his attention by holding aloft the hourglass, a reminder of the brevity of life.

Dürer’s iconography is characteristically complex. Animals are symbolic: the serpents that coil around Death’s head, the pig-like features of the Devil, the striding forth of the knight’s horse, the downcast head of Death’s nag, the dog bounding forwards and the lizard retreating, all are imbued with eschatological meaning.

When challenged with the need to illustrate what is beyond human knowing, what is experienced beyond the moment of death, medieval iconographers resorted to

⁸⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 51

allegory and rhetoric to explain the inexplicable. Consequently, they devised a demonology of incredible conceptual beings by hybridising human, animal and plant forms. The devil of Dürer's engraving typifies the imagined interpretation of demonic creatures as deranged and be-horned beasts.



Plate 3: 2
Death and the Four Elements
 Simon Vostre's *Book of Hours*, 1502

The animal's metaphorical use in demonology is inextricably interwoven with the desire to subjugate nature to the system of positions, orders and rules perceived to be God's plan of Creation. Reference to an image like *Death and the Four Elements* in Simon Vostre's *Book of Hours* (Plate 3: 2) clarifies the complex symbolic information ascribed to nature. Here Death and the Joker or Fool are surrounded by the four elements of fire, air, earth and water that ordered the centrifugal cosmology of the Middle Ages. These elements explained the rhythms of man, nature and the universe: the seasons, the nature of the animals of the

earth and all cosmic phenomena. Bird, beast and fish were delineated according to their habitat and contained within specific boundaries of air, earth and water. Harmony between elements from 'above,' fire and air, was not shared by the elements associated with 'below,' earth and water. The animal kingdom was sorted accordingly. Sea creatures were forever separated from the birds of the air and beasts, having neither wings nor gills, were rightly located on the land.⁸¹

Reptiles and amphibians seemed to exist within two realms at once: earth and water.⁸² Other animals also fall within this category of transitional beings. Bats, for instance, can fly but are not birds and so intermingle elements of earth and air. Although they were natural creatures, they transgressed the boundaries between the elements and created, in the schema of medieval thought, an imbalance. As a result they were readily perceived as omens of disease, insanity and cataclysm, even harbingers of plague. Abject anomalies, they suggest the monstrous and were easily appropriated as personifications of evil.

The words of Genesis reassured humanity that it was to enjoy '*dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth*' (Genesis 1: 26, 28). Unlike humans who were said to be created in the image of God, animals were presumed to be inferior, a lower order of physical beings. The imperative to differentiate humanity from bestial 'others,' was justified by the presumption that animals lacked a rational soul.⁸³ Nature had to be subjugated to an anthropocentric view of creation. The animal emerges as

⁸¹ Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. 177-79

⁸² Ibid. 178

⁸³ Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006). See in particular, Chapter 1 "Being Human," 7-38 Michael Camille also comments on the materiality of animals in that they "cannot exist without their bodies, having no souls and not being included in God's salvatory plan." Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. 70

the benchmark against which human status is measured: the animals' irrationality confirmed the rationality of human beings and hence their superiority.

Consequently, animal behaviour was appropriated, anthropomorphised and the animal objectified, often pejoratively, to figuratively explain the base nature of human behaviour.⁸⁴ Beastly behaviour was objectionable, vile and revolting. The pig, for instance, was associated with filth, slovenliness and gluttony. Animals were used as descriptors of the abject, encapsulating the offensiveness of what was blatantly human (mis)conduct.

Various illustrated bestiaries, translations and adaptations from the Latin *Physiologus* provided a rich source for animal iconography and symbolism for medieval thought and art.⁸⁵ The theocentric medieval world assumed that as nature reflected God's plan, the purpose of the animal kingdom was to supply human beings with earthly exempla that signified the divine.⁸⁶ The bestiary stories were not meant to be naturalistic observations of animal traits and habits but to be interpreted as allegory revealing the metaphysical and transcendent significance of the natural world. Tales of creatures, real and fantastic, the lion, eagle, serpent, ant, hart, fox, spider, whale, mermaid, elephant, panther, and dove are enlivened with anecdotes and moralistic platitudes.

To the medieval mind all animate creatures were categorised in God-given hierarchical terms. Those animals that dwelt below the earth occupied the lowest place. Satan was said to have abused the wisdom of the serpent, using him to deceive man and hence leading to the expulsion of the first humans from Eden. As punishment it was cursed:

⁸⁴ Michael Camille acknowledges the influence of images from the period in how we now think of animal names as terms of abuse, "as ways of marking boundaries between clean and unclean."

Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. 70

⁸⁵ Hanneke Wirtjes, ed., *The Middle English Physiologus* (Oxford: Published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press. 1991)

⁸⁶ Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England*. 107

...above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life... (Genesis 3:14-15)

Consequently, serpents seem to represent all the uncomprehended dangers of the natural world together with the traumas and diseases that destroy the human body. This picture is further complicated by the ability of the snake to shed its skin and thus be symbolically connected with either deception or resurrection.



Plate 3: 3
Hugo van der Goes, *The Fall of Man*, ca.1475,
Oil on panel, 32 x 22cm
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Plate 3: 4
Michelangelo, *The Fall of Man*, 1509-1510
 Detail of fresco from ceiling of the Sistine Chapel,
 Vatican, Rome



Plate 3: 5
Albrecht Dürer, *The Fall of Man*, 1504
 Engraving, 25.1 x 20cm
 Philipps University, Marburg

The visual representation of Satan was never static. After all, he had to transmute between serpentine tempter of the fall, rebel angel expelled from heaven, demonic lord of hell and finally deformed and depraved human or animal impersonator and lecherous seducer of human-kind. In Hugo van der Goes' *Fall of Man* (Plate 3: 3), a hybrid mutation with the face of a rather innocent child merges seamlessly into the torso, limbs and tail of a lizard. In Michelangelo's *Fall of Man* (Plate 3:4) a woman's body emerges from the coils of a snake encircling the tree trunk. The satanic figure is here a serpentine-human hybrid, the teratological seductress of humanity.

In Dürer's *Fall of Man* (Plate 3: 5) the serpent is without human allusion, the reptile is totally subsumed in representing evil. The snake in this engraving would have been read by Dürer's contemporaries in the same way they would have accepted an animal symbol for each of the four temperaments: the elk denoting

melancholic gloom, the rabbit sanguine sensuality, the cat choleric cruelty, and the ox phlegmatic sluggishness.⁸⁷

Animals represented an enormous repertoire of significance beyond their natural embodiment and this informs their transformation as monstrous beings. Moreover, because the monster is not a natural animal but an amalgamation of differing bird, beast and fish bodies, it cannot be defined as exclusively inhabiting one of the realms of air, fire, earth and water. In this way the monster subverts '*borders, positions and rules*' thus endorsing Bakhtin's description of the grotesque as a negation that privileges disorder over order. For Kristeva, its confused identity embodies the abject. It also brings to mind David Williams' ambiguous being standing as figurative sign for what is beyond the phenomenally real.⁸⁸

Williams' argument, that medieval teratological imagery is founded on the concept of an apophatic theology, treats the monster as signifier of the sacred.⁸⁹ Affirmative language, by effectively limiting the concept of God, is inadequate to signify that which is beyond description. God described by negation is totally transcendent, opening an ever expanding potential of greater meaning. In apophatic theology the mimetic tradition of revealing the world through logic and the power of discourse is supplanted by rhetoric and allegory as the primary vehicle for knowing.⁹⁰ The monster for Williams is not a 'thing' but a 'sign':

⁸⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, 4th ed. (Princeton, New Jersey Princeton University Press, 1955). 120, 84-87

⁸⁸ Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. 12. See also Chapter 1, 14-15

⁸⁹ Ibid. 16

⁹⁰ Ibid. 7; As Pseudo-Dionysius (considered the originator of apophatic thought) ascribes the negative as the itinerary of a religious unknowing:

I pray that we could come to this darkness so far above light! If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge. For this would be really to see and to know: to praise the Transcending One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings.

...the poetic and rhetorical constructions of the paradoxes, ambiguities, grotesqueries, and monstrosities of mediaeval art and legend, which sufficiently deform the normal process of signification so as to urge the mind beyond the restrictions of language and logic.⁹¹

In a similar vein to Williams, Jacques Derrida utilizes the monster as allegory, a (secular) catalyst for future disruptions in the deconstruction of text. Derrida's monster, 'a species for which we do not yet have a name,' is an analogy of the constitutive play of difference within and in-between speech that is deconstructed discourse.⁹² Derrida's mode of deconstruction differs from negative theology in that the monstrosity of discourse is not a precursor to divine revelation but to what Owen Ware characterises as the 'transgression of language, of speaking the unspeakable'.⁹³

The mute, terrifying form of silence deconstruction encounters is not that of a transcendent, but of a singular monstrosity constantly disrupting discourse, of an elusive limit that places Derrida's texts at the edge of the abyss, of madness and of silence.⁹⁴

For both Williams and Derrida the monster defies the boundaries that delineate it as the embodiment of otherness. Williams claims the monster signifies:

the paradoxical morphology of nonforms, a system of categories of nothing, which, however, like the ladder of the mystics, functions to raise the understanding to a point at which its steps, rungs, ranks, and slots and all other affirmative differentiations become dispensable.⁹⁵

Pseudo-Dionysius, "Mystical Theology," in *Complete Works*, ed. Colm Lubheid and Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). 1025A

⁹¹ Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. 9

⁹² Owen Ware, "Impossible Passions: Derrida and Negative Theology," *Philosophy Today* 49, no. 2 (2005). 171

⁹³ Ibid. 174

⁹⁴ Ibid. 171

⁹⁵ Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. 108

Derrida reasons, 'as soon as one perceives a monster in a monster' it can no longer function beyond taxonomic boundaries: it would cease to exist as monster. In Derrida's view the monster defies anticipation, reappropriation, calculation or any form of predetermination.⁹⁶ Deconstruction, however, contains the potential for an unprecedented future eruption of yet more unfathomable monstrosities.⁹⁷ Williams also perceives the volatile alterity of the taxonomic categorization of monstrous bodies which he claims is '*fundamentally arbitrary and absolutely impermanent*'.⁹⁸

As a phenomena of apophatic theology (or Derridean a-theology), the realm of the unknowable monster is beyond the boundaries of mundane reality, of earthly experience, of birth and death, of nature and history. Interpreted as medieval demonology where all is in a state of flux, nothing is as it seems. The bodies of disparate creatures intermingle and fuse in a miasma of extraordinary combinations.

For Marina Warner in *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*, the monster is situated in a hell revealing by negation the nature of heaven. Within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, she proposes:

*...metamorphosis has marked out heterodoxy, instability, perversity, unseemliness, monstrosity. As a philosophical and literary trope, as a theological principle, as cosmic and biological explanation, it distinguishes good from evil, the blessed from the heathen and the damned: in the Christian heaven, nothing changes, whereas in hell, everything combines and recombines in terrible amalgams, compounds, breeding hybrids, monsters—and mutants.*⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Ware, "Impossible Passions: Derrida and Negative Theology." 177; Jacques Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity, 2001). 21

⁹⁷ Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Weber, *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974-1994* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995). 387

⁹⁸ Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. 108

⁹⁹ Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self, The Clarendon Lectures in English* ; 2001. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). 35-6

The monster is marked by metamorphosis, thus distinguishing hellish mayhem and horror from the delight of an eternally predictable, monster-denying heaven.



Plate 3: 6
Hieronymous Bosch, *The Temptation of St Anthony* (centre panel) c1500-1509
Oil on panel, 131.5 x 119cm
Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga. Lisbon, Portugal

Hybridising, transforming and metamorphosing by combining the body parts of humans, animals and plants, the satanic and hellish demonology of medieval iconography is re-imagined in myriad configurations. The art of Hieronymous Bosch (ca. 1450-1516, Plate 3: 6), and the slightly later work of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca.1525-1569, Plate 3: 7), clearly epitomise the impetus to give figurative interpretation to the realm of demonic instability. The repertoire embraces the shapeshifting insect, the diabolic frogs, serpents and nasty little creatures with wings, fangs and tails that slither and cavort and transgress the boundaries

between air, earth, fire and water. The monstrous was no longer depicted as isolated individuals in the matter-of-fact informative way that the deformed monstrous races appear on the *mappae mundi*, but were animated in dramatic dialogue with humanity as they scramble about poking and prodding the damned.



Plate 3: 7
Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, 1562
Oil on panel, 118.5 x 162.5 cm
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

Bakhtin proposed that, in the writing of Rabelais, spontaneous obscenities, festive madness, carnivalesque parodies, comic devils, ludicrous monstrosities and grotesque bodily processes, dispensed of terror and catastrophe through laughter. The ‘*ever unfinished, ever creating*’ grotesque body was to be celebrated and so, by association, were all those sites of abjection from which repulsive and sickening excretions might leak. The ‘*abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties*’ of Rabelais’ language put emphasis on bodily protuberances and convexities, excretions and excesses, and revealed the earthiness rather

than earthliness of the monstrous grotesque.¹⁰⁰ The depiction of demons as unclean and improper, vulgar and repulsive also assured their magical capacity to protect. *'All that was terrifying becomes grotesque.'*¹⁰¹

By the later Middle Ages, malevolent beings with a seemingly boundless number of dynamic monstrous forms interfere with the typology of the grotesque body. The gaping mouth of a giant head that opens to ingest sinners is a recurring motif that literally represents the jaws of hell. Although the head was more often animal-like, in Bruegel's *Dulle Griet* (Mad Meg, Plate 3: 8) the head is grotesquely human.¹⁰² Bakhtin argues that the devil mouth is a doorway leading down into the underworld of the body. The act of swallowing, he alleges, was an ancient symbol of death and destruction.¹⁰³

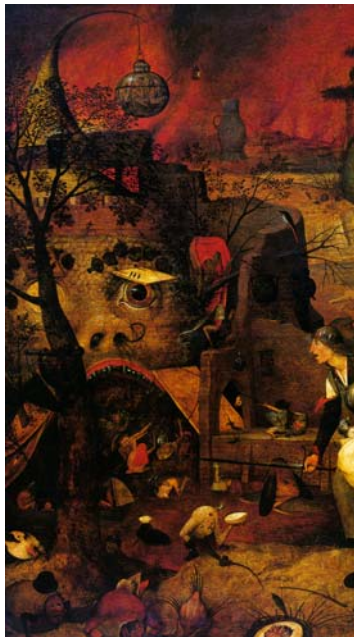


Plate 3: 8
Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Dulle Griet* (detail)
1561
Oil on panel,
Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp



Plate 3: 9
Martin Schongauer, *Green Devil* (detail)
***Christ in Limbo* ca. 1475**
Dominican Altarpiece, Oil on wood
Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, France

¹⁰⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.187-8

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 91

¹⁰² Bruegel is fond of also representing the jaws of Hell as the mouth of a bloated fish out-of-water.

¹⁰³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 325

As the mouth, with its insinuation of ingestion, is fundamental to the making of monsters in medieval iconography so too were other sites where the natural boundaries of the body were transgressed. A demon could fascinate or bewitch with a look or an evil gaze.¹⁰⁴ The anus and genitals, sites of expulsion, were logically appropriated as indicators of monstrous deformation. The vulgarity of the satanic demon is enshrined in an exposed anus or the hugely-proportioned phallus. An extra face positioned where genitals would normally be found (Plate 3: 9) was unambiguous comment on the contemptible nature of the diabolic figure. On the demonic posterior face the mouth and anus are as one and the nose curves threateningly upward like an erect animal penis. The bizarre body of the demon demonstrates its dependence on a vocabulary of inversion, of what Bakhtin named '*turning the world on its head*,' elevating the '*lower bodily stratum*'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. 75

¹⁰⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.



Plate 3: 10
Matthias Grünewald, *The Temptation of St Anthony* ca. 1512-16
Right wing, third view of the Isenheim Altarpiece
Oil on panel, 265 x 141 (139) cm
Unterlinden Museum in Colmar

A persistent theme of late medieval painting was the fantastic and monstrous tempters that besiege the unfortunate Saint Anthony. Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel and their contemporaries relished the opportunity to devise marvellous scenarios of unlikely creatures. But one altarpiece arguably transcends this

impetus to simply invent the anomalies of demonic life forms: the altarpiece commissioned from Matthias Grünewald by the monastic order of Antonites at Isenheim. On the *Temptation of St Anthony* panel (Plate 3: 10, opened in its third position, right wing) St Anthony is tempted or, rather, tormented by a dynamic cluster of hybrid creatures, the demonic bird and animal demons that we could expect from such a genre. In the foreground, however, a very different and tortured being collapses helplessly in the bottom left hand corner. His distended stomach is pocked with boils and his left arm is withered. He is a creature of utter desolation, oblivious to any solace or carnivalesque diversions from an encroaching and fearful death.

Shockingly, because at first he appears to be completely human, the hapless victim is, or rather is in the process of, metamorphosis: his legs are slowly transforming into webbed frog's feet. The amphibian metaphor infers monstrous transformation. Shapeshifting from tadpole to frog, it symbolizes satanic transmutation. Similarly, it contravenes the laws of transgression by contravening the boundaries between the elements of earth and water and so embodies evil.¹⁰⁶ He is a perverse figure of abjection that:

...neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them.¹⁰⁷

Such aberrations characterise these animals as harbingers of disease, insanity and natural disaster. Here is a figure at the crossroad between life and death, salvation and damnation imploring, rather like the donor in similar contemporary compositions, consideration of divine intervention on Judgement Day. The monastery in which the altarpiece was housed was dedicated to St Anthony, and contained a hospital which, according to the monks' own records, specifically

¹⁰⁶ Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. 173

¹⁰⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 15

cared for the victims of a sickness called St Anthony's fire.¹⁰⁸ The cause of this illness was unknown until 1597 when it was recognised as being caused by a form of poisoning from ergot-infested rye bread.¹⁰⁹ At the time of Grünewald's painting, however, it was yet another of the scourges and pestilence such as the Black Death. The symptoms were distinguished by an '*infernal fire*' with hallucinations, visions and delusions accompanied by infected boils, stomach distension and, as the disease advanced, gangrene of the feet and hands.¹¹⁰

Astute observations made by Andrée Hayum shed light on the meaning and function of the altarpiece in the monastic hospice. He contends that the metamorphosing figure spoke to the suffering and moral trials of the hospital's patients.¹¹¹ Placed in context with the other parts of the altarpiece, a story unfolds about protection and transformation through suffering. The torment of the afflicted, like the temptations inflicted on St Anthony, is a test of faith in Christian salvation.

The gruesome disfigurement of the figure does not detract from its pitiable situation and, as Hayum suggests, its position at eye level suggests the hospice's fellow sufferers were meant to identify with it.¹¹² In contrast to the aggression of the other demons there is perceptible compassion shown in the pathos of its supine body and obvious helplessness. Considering this, there is a distinct

¹⁰⁸ Andrée Hayum, "The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context," *Art Bulletin* 59, no. 4 (1977). 501-517 Aymar Falco, the official historian of the order, declared the primary goal of the Antonite monastery to be the care of those afflicted with St Anthony's fire. 503

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 507; Hayum points suggests these symptoms resemble the effects of the drug LSD which is a synthesised form of ergot. Hayum, "The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context." 516

¹¹⁰ Mary Allerton Kilbourne Matossian, *Poisons of the Past: Molds, Epidemics, and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). 56-8; Warren M.D. Dotz, "St. Anthony's Fire," *The American Journal of Dermatopathology* 2, no. 3 (1980). 249

¹¹¹ Hayum, "The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context." 503

¹¹² Ibid. 507

possibility that it is not the tormented figure but rather the disease that Grünewald is portraying as demonic. This observation also has implications for the demon in another panel of the altarpiece. Here St Jerome remains, as did the resolute knight in Dürer's engraving, in oblivious contemplation while a demon exhaling what could well be the foul air of plague crashes through the circular panes of an ecclesiastical window behind him (Plate 3: 11).

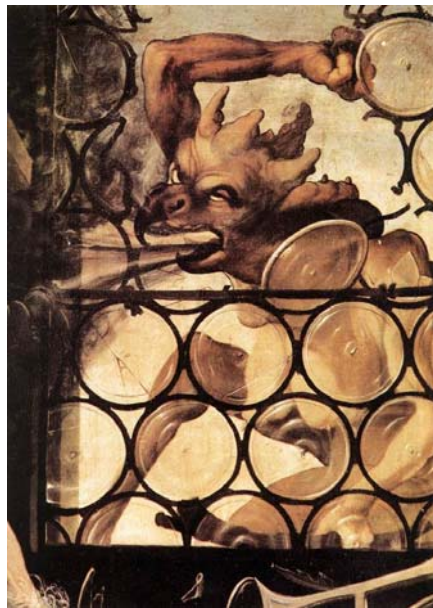


Plate 3: 11
Matthias Grünewald, Demon from St Jerome Panel (detail)
Isenheim Altarpiece
Unterlinden Museum in Colmar

Deformed, disfigured and diseased, precipitously near to death, the hapless metamorphic figure of the *Temptation* panel is situated in a liminal territory where identities are volatile; negotiating, shifting, transforming and subverting. Suffering, as defined by Kristeva, is the intimate face of horror.¹¹³ An intolerable ambiguity that is expelled or abjected from the self, a creature cast out by unspeakable taboo, Kristeva would have its re-embodiment through the catharsis of art, literature or religion:

¹¹³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 141

*The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth... The abject is edged with the sublime.*¹¹⁴

Science and medicine, on the other hand, seek to reincorporate the corporeal by eradicating, aborting, curing or alleviating all suffering. Imagining the monstrous as disease or deformity indicates a shifting of emphasis from transcendental theology to the empirical rationalizations of medicine and science. In the second part of this dissertation I follow this trajectory, questioning the metaphor of the monster to illuminate the perceptions of teratological investigation. Once more I frame my chapters according to the schema of the *mappae mundi*: Chapter IV considers the unbounded body of deformity, Chapter V, terminal illness and death and Chapter VI, the genetically altered unbounded body of xenotransplantation cloning and genetic engineering.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.9-11

PART TWO

The Monster Transformed: death, deformity and genetic manipulation

The first three chapters of this thesis considered the medieval Judeo-Christian desire to impose order on the world, mapping and demarking boundaries of earthly life, death and the afterlife. The *mappae mundi* functioned didactically, representing the perfection of God's plan while accommodating the contradictory forces, aberrant or malevolent, in specific regions of the mapped world: races of physically anomalous beings and bizarre animals were banished to the outer fringes of the earth; death occupied a geographic region circumnavigating the earth and beyond that an afterworld where phantasmagorical beings floated weightlessly in heavenly bliss or displayed the grotesque distortions of a truly demonic hell.

Throughout history we have feared that which contravenes the boundaries of what we consider to be the natural order of things. Located within the schema of the map, the monster fulfills a need to give physical form to these fears, to conquer this frightening otherness by giving it a place in the world structured by rules and boundaries.

To create an image of the monster, medieval iconographers resorted to the language of abjection. The orifices and protuberances of the body were emphasized, blurring the threshold between bodily interior and exterior and wallowing in the taboos against filth and sexual depravity. In the fear-driven culture of medieval religion grotesque physiology was made to stand for aberrance. The monster's taxonomic incongruity epitomised the ultimate expression of vulgarity and disgust. Similar to Kristeva's description of the abject, the monster was also horrific. It too could appear '*double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject*'.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 207

In *The Monster Transformed*, the second part of my thesis, I investigate the historical persistence of the concept of the monstrous as an embodiment of abject otherness. It is revealing that the archetypal medieval monster with its distorted, hybrid features still reverberates in the terminology of science and medicine. Teratology, for instance, the modern study of congenital and environmental foetal malformation, is linguistically linked to notions of the monster. The term is derived from the Greek, *teras*, meaning monster.¹¹⁶ Our discomfort with otherness of the deformed, diseased or decaying body is alleviated by researching and implementing ways and means to control it.

In the final chapter I scrutinise recent advances of medical science in such fields as transplantation and xenotransplantation of bodily organs, tissues and cells and the experimental cloning and breeding of transgenic animals. A transgenic animal, or chimera, is achieved by combining embryonic stem cells of two or more different species and implanting them in the uterus of a surrogate mother drawn from one of the species.¹¹⁷ This procedure is suggested as a potential alternative to use of human organs in transplantation surgery. Pigs, for instance, can be bred with human embryonic stem cells, making their body parts less liable to be rejected in xenotransplantation.

Like the chimera of Greek mythology, the transgenic chimera is born a mosaic of the species involved in its conception. It is an unprecedented life form, a nonspecies outside the parameters of taxonomic boundaries. It conforms,

¹¹⁶ Naminder Sandhu, "Little Monsters: Deconstructing the History of Congenital Malformations" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the 14th Annual History of Medicine Days, Faculty of medicine, The University of Calgary, 2005).

<http://www.ucalgary.ca/uofc/Others/HOM/Proceedings%202005.pdf>

¹¹⁷ Stuart A Newman, "My Attempt to Patent a Human-Animal Chimera," *L'Observatoire de la génétique* 27, no. avril-mai (2006).

http://www.nymc.edu/sanewman/PDFs/L'Observatoire%20Genetique_chimera.pdf accessed online June 2008

instead, with the criteria of the monstrous. In the same way, the human body that has been altered by incorporating animal body parts raises contentious ethical dilemmas. While it may not hold the promise of a medieval afterlife, the surreal experimentation of medical science is presented by the profession as a promising development in its goal of forestalling death.

Chapter IV

Teratogenic fantasies: anomalous births and monstrous carnivals

In this chapter I trace the shifting social perceptions of physical deformity to the present day and investigate the extent to which the deformed body is perceived as a monstrous body, a grotesque that defies taxonomic integrity. In the course of the discussion I scrutinize the perverse mixture of fascination and repulsion that drew crowds to ogle deformed or mutilated bodies in the nineteenth-century freak show. I question whether the inherent derision and mockery of deformity and disfigurement in these exhibitions is situated in the horror of discovering self-likeness in the abnormal 'other'. Furthermore, I investigate how this voyeuristic exploitation is echoed in the photographic tableau of Joel-Peter Witkin who adamantly asserts he is revealing the distinctive beauty of '*unusual people*' by situating his disabled models in elaborate tableaux referencing well known works of art.¹¹⁸ Bodies that radically differ from the accepted norm possess a particular power to both fascinate and repel.

Following these case studies, I believe it becomes apparent that the urge to banish physical otherness has not diminished in today's environment. Physical deformity and disfigurement have become a medical challenge with a focus concentrated on the eradication of aberrant conditions. While prevention or cure may appear to be worthy goals, the inference is that disability is intolerable. The presumption resurfaces that whatever transgresses the boundaries of what we consider to be the natural order of things is somehow monstrous – a horror to be conquered through scrutiny, analysis and control.

The history of modern medicine is scattered with uncomfortable references to a medieval past. This is apparent in the difficulties that Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778)

¹¹⁸ The euphemistic term was used by Witkin in an interview with Peter Schjedldahl, *Shudderbug*, *The Village Voice*, October 31, 1995

faced in his inaugural taxonomic categorisation of living organisms with fitting aberrant bodies neatly within a taxonomic order. His solution was simple: as well as the four races corresponding to the four humours, *Homo sapiens* included an additional species, *Homo monstrous*.¹¹⁹ This category included those mythical animals familiar as the incredible creatures of the *mappae mundi*, the existence of whom Linnaeus does not question, together with all individuals who physically or mentally deviated from the norm. Significantly, these included the monsters of natural birth, with unmistakable animal-like features: elephant boy, camel girl, bear girl, and fish boy.¹²⁰ For Linnaeus, abnormality threatened species homogeneity. Accordingly, in his system the malformed were perceived as human/animal hybrids, barely recognised scientifically as fully human.

It is these apparently hybrid people that so fascinated Witkin. Concluding the publication of his photographic essay, *Gods of Earth and Heaven*, he appealed for models for his photographic tableau. His interest is in contacting '*physical marvels*':

...a person, thing or act so extraordinary as to inspire wonder: someone with wings, horns, tails, fins, claws, reversed feet, head, hands. Anyone with additional arms, legs, eyes, breasts, genitals, ears, nose, lips, head. Anyone without a face. Pinheads, dwarfs, giants, Satyrs. A woman with one breast (center); a woman with breasts so large as to require Daliesque supports; women whose faces are covered with hair or large skin lesions and willing to pose in evening gowns. Active and retired sideshow performers, contortionists (erotic), anyone with a parasitic twin, people who live as comic book heroes. Boot, corset and bondage fetishists, a beautiful woman with functional appendages in place of arms, anorexics (preferably bald), the romantic and criminally insane (nude only). All manner of extreme visual perversions. A young blonde girl with two faces. Hermaphrodites and taratoids (alive and dead). Beings from

¹¹⁹ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon And Schuster, 1978).²⁴⁰ The four races and their humours are: Native Americans /choleric, Africans/ phlegmatic, Asians/ melancholic and Europeans / sanguine.

¹²⁰ Philip K. Wilson, "Eighteenth Century Monsters and Nineteenth Century Freaks: Reading the Maternally Marked Child," *Literature and Medicine* 21, no. 1 (2002). 6-8

*other planets. Anyone bearing the wounds of Christ. Anyone claiming to be God. God.*¹²¹

Witkin is prone to hyperbole. He likens himself to 'a shaman, priest, and mystic, capable of taking on the higher order of dialogue between the invisible and the visible...the marriage of the body to the spirit, the eye of flesh to the glass eye of the camera'.¹²² He invites his models to be transformed: wonder will drive out disgust, give them a mythical rebirth, and transport them to the environs of the history of painting.¹²³

In actuality, he is substituting the grotesque body of his model for the sublime body represented historically in works of art. Hence, for example, the pre-op transsexuals in *Gods of Earth and Heaven* (Los Angeles, 1988) are replacements for the elegant figures in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (ca.1485), the Infanta in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) is transformed as one of Witkin's disabled models in an over-the-top surreal tableau and *John Herring, P.W.A. Posed as Flora and Lover and Mother* (New Mexico, 1992) is a remake of Rembrandt's *Saskia as Flora* (ca. 1634-35).¹²⁴ Seeking out these extraordinary rather than ordinary bodies implied, implicitly or explicitly, a perception of the binary opposition between beauty and ugliness. By needing to bestow such gifts of magical transformation, Witkin was accepting these bodies to be grotesque and, in his own words disgusting and, by implication, abject.

¹²¹ Afterword to Joel-Peter Witkin, *Gods of Earth and Heaven* (Pasadena, CA: Twelvetreets Press, 1989).

¹²² Eugenia Parry, *Joel-Peter Witkin* (London: Phaidon, 2007). no pagination

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Germano Celant et al., *Witkin* (Zürich: Scalo, 1995). Plate 75, Plate 69, Plate 97 John Herring was a florist who was facing an early death from the AIDS virus.



Plate 4: 1
Joel-Peter Witkin, *Leda*, 1986
Los Angeles



Plate 4: 2
Cesare da Sesto, Copy of *Leda and the Swan* by Leonardo da Vinci, c.1505-1510.
Oil on wood, 69.5 x 73.7 cm
Wilton House, Salisbury, UK

A closer examination of several images from Witkin's photography serves to demonstrate the connection between his ideas and the abject nature of physical disfigurement. His *Leda* (Plate 4:1), a revision of the lost *Leda and the Swan* of Leonardo da Vinci (Plate 4: 2),¹²⁵ substitutes the frail misshapen body of a drag queen for da Vinci's sublime classical Leda. *Leda and the Swan* was one of the classic myths of metamorphosis. In the most widely-held version, Zeus, assuming the guise of the swan, seduced Leda resulting in Leda giving birth to two eggs: one containing Castor and Clytemnestra who are taken to be the offspring of her

¹²⁵ The work is known to us from copies made by his followers. In 1625 Cassiano del Pozzo describes a *Leda and the Swan* at Fontainebleau (where it is believed by many to have hung) as a "standing figure of Leda almost entirely naked, with the swan at her and two eggs from whose broken shells come forth four babies..." K. R. Eissler, *Leonardo Da Vinci: Psychoanalytic Notes on the Enigma* (New York: International Universities Press, 1961).¹³⁷ This version of the *Leda* is thought to be close to the original. In Witkin's remake only two babies emerge newly hatched from their broken eggshell.

mortal husband, Tyndareus, and the other Pollux and Helen who claim the paternity of the God and hence, immortality.¹²⁶ The myth was well known in the middle ages and became a popular subject with the resurgence of classical themes in the art of the Italian Renaissance.

Despite the similar placement of the figures in Witkin's *Leda*, his model's misshapen body is the antithesis of da Vinci's sensual female enclosed in the soft feathers of an adoring swan. Witkin's image is desolate. There is no eye contact between his Leda and her swan. The swan itself is static, a taxidermied prop. The background is not a lavish landscape but a sparse, ominously lit backdrop. The children (and here there are only two babies unlike the legendary two sets of twins or the da Vinci version) appear to be crawling around in the squalid debris of the broken eggshell.

The contrast between the two bodies, the paradigm of feminine perfection and the sexually indeterminate and physically distorted body, highlights the dichotomy between concepts of beauty and ugliness. The two bodies underline the polarities that Mikhail Bakhtin claimed to be the closed, finished body of the official culture (in this case the ideal of classical beauty) and the unstable, nonspecific everchanging grotesque body.¹²⁷ Bakhtin affirmed the grotesque as the regenerative element which gave voice to the people through carnivalesque laughter. Witkin fails to afford his Leda the same role. Despite his protestations that the models in his photographic images were to be transformed, Witkin's forlorn Leda is prosaically objectified; his/her confused gender and implicit deviation from aesthetic convention ensure that he/she is being exposed as the embodiment of otherness. Witkin's work is an essay in the abject. Abject, as

¹²⁶James David Draper, "For the Love of Leda," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 30, no. 2 (1971). 50-58

¹²⁷Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 24-27

Kristeva declared, because this body '*disturbs identity, system, order ... [and] does not respect borders, positions, rules*'.¹²⁸



Plate 4: 3
Joel -Peter Witkin, *Daphne and Apollo*, 1990
Los Angeles

Monstrous birth in Witkin's photographs is a medical anomaly, not the fantastic offspring of the animals of legend. Leda's swan is dead skin stretched over a taxidermist's form, a theatrical prop. Similarly, another Witkin image based on metamorphosis mythology reinforces the deliberate artifice of his technique: the goat that pursues a dwarf Daphne in *Apollo and Daphne* has the wings of a god strapped clumsily to his back. (Plate 4: 3) Wings are another of the prosthetic devices – instruments of sadistic fetish, ubiquitous leather masks, an antique chaise longue, breast cones, crucifixes, taxidermy, fruit, vegetables - that are intrinsic to his carefully realized tableau. Witkin's image is deliberately theatrical, a staged narrative. He makes clear his cognisance of photography's illusion:

*Photography is inherently anaesthetic. Internally the photograph comes between itself and what it depicts. This enables photography's essential theatricality, that in its photogenesis it costumes and makes up what it depicts, and as easily as it documents it.*¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 4

¹²⁹ Witkin, *Gods of Earth and Heaven*. (no pagination)

The mythology of the metamorphosing body calls attention to changing attitudes towards the dangers of bestiality and abnormal birth. The ancient Greeks and Romans appeared quite comfortable with their gods assuming animal form to mate with beautiful mortals. Neither were they morally appalled by the extraordinary event of a woman giving birth by laying eggs like a bird or reptile. The transmutation and metamorphosis of classical mythology was in stark contrast to the Christian Church's preoccupation with witchcraft and the belief that it was a devil not a god that might assume animal form to ravage the womenfolk.¹³⁰ Copulation between the species was understood to be the most abhorrent of sins against nature. The medieval Christian mind was horrified by deformed births, animal or human, because these '*horrible, hideous, loathsome and abominable*' births were associated with the '*mingling of seed*' or bestial liaison.¹³¹ The horror entailed an implicit threat that human beings could capitulate to the unrestrainedly sexual and murderous beast and hence crossing, as Kristeva suggests, into '*those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal*.'¹³² By implication the deformed body was construed as unbounded, abject.

However, new attitudes to birth defects and abnormal physiology were emerging with the Renaissance interest in empirical scientific enquiry. Abnormality, it was suggested, might be caused by natural phenomena, an accidental aberration in the development of an embryo. The curious list of thirteen causes of monstrous births outlined in Ambroise Paré's *Des monstres et prodiges* (1573) – from the glory or wrath of God or demons and devils, to more scientifically-viable causes such as hereditary or accidental illness – point towards the modern medical

¹³⁰ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London; New York: Longman, 1987). 28-30

¹³¹ Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, trans. Janis L Pallister (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). 3, 5

¹³² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.¹²

disciplines of embryology, genetics and modern teratology.¹³³ Nevertheless, it was not until the early 19th century that teratological research focused purely on the study of morphological, biochemical, or behavioural birth defects, thereby eliminating the imaginary monster from its scope of interest.¹³⁴

Knowledge of anatomical deviation was typically gained through dissection. But medical experiments were not discreetly secured in the laboratory. Stillborn, dead, or partially-dissected specimens were 'pickled', and proved to be valuable commodities. They served as status symbols: highly priced trophies for gentlemen collectors of curiosities.¹³⁵ Attitudes toward collecting exemplify the diverse preoccupations with art, philosophy and science that characterised Renaissance humanism.

By the mid-16th century the avid and eclectic collection of natural and ethnographic objects was widespread in royal, noble and educated societies. Cabinets of wonder (*Wunderkammer*) and chambers of curiosities (*Kunstkammer*), aspired to capture the macrocosmic world of nature in the microcosm of cabinets or chambers. Collectors took differing approaches to display. The collections of Francesco I de' Medici's (1541-87), for instance, were assembled for his own personal enjoyment and edification, and housed in opulent but intimate and introspective chambers within the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence.

This contemplative form of display also evolved in the small-scale cabinets like those designed by the Augsburg merchant Phillip Haushofer. These cabinets emulate grander *Kunstkammer* but the collections of *artificialia* (man-made) and *naturalia* (natural) were displayed, in miniature, in one piece of dedicated

¹³³ Pare, *On Monsters and Marvels*.

¹³⁴ Sandhu, "Little Monsters: Deconstructing the History of Congenital Malformations". 5

¹³⁵ Wilson, "Eighteenth Century Monsters and Nineteenth Century Freaks: Reading the Maternally Marked Child."6

furniture. Manufactured with princely clients in mind, the cabinets were elaborately decorated and came fitted out with intact collections of curiosities.¹³⁶

On the other hand, the enormous *Kunstammer* of Albrecht V of Bavaria (1528-79) welcomed visitors to the spectacle of vast galleries overcrowded with a great many curious specimens, hunting trophies, objects of silver and gold, carved ivory from Africa, antique sculptures and portraits.¹³⁷ It was further enhanced by the spectacle of crocodiles, tortoises and other exotica hanging from the ceilings.¹³⁸

The arrangement of Albrecht's *Kunstammer* was to become the archetype of the cabinet of curiosities that remained popular throughout the 16th, and into the 17th, century.¹³⁹ Every available space was utilised to accommodate the collection. Crocodiles, porcupines, puffer fish and other peculiar ichthyoes, bears, birds, shellfish, frogs, armadillos, lizards and other creatures from different elements and hemispheres were suspended, in incongruous correlation, from the ceiling. Walls were lined with open shelves and cabinets, often heavily ornamented, to accommodate further examples of curious specimens, some in glass jars, some stacked in boxes and some displayed in open pigeonholes. Numerous large books suggested philosophical writings, herbaria or portfolios of drawings. Natural specimens, precious stones and other geological phenomena contrasted with

¹³⁶ Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 17

¹³⁷ Turpin, Adriana. "The New World Collections of Duke Cosimo 1 De' Medici and Their Role in the Creation of a *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammer* in Palazzo Vecchio." In *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, edited by Robert John Weston Evans and Alexander Marr. (Aldershot, England; Burlington, 2006.) 80

¹³⁸ MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* 13-15

¹³⁹ Ibid. The organisation of these 17th century cabinets is known to us from engravings. The cabinet of Ole Worm 20, Francesco Calzolari's cabinet in Verona and 'Ritratto del Museo di Ferrante Imperato' 23, The cabinet of Ferdinando Cospi 25, The museum of Manfredo Settala, Milan 26

manmade objects: tools of trade, ancient sculpture, works of art, mechanical and scientific instruments and artifacts from the newly discovered cultures of the New World were scattered amongst the display.



**Image 4: 4 *Ritratto del Museo di Ferrante Imperato*,
from Imperato's *Historia Naturalis* (1599)**

While the diversity of objects and specimens in these collections spoke of the idiosyncrasies of particular collectors, the overall scheme of the *Kunstkammer* appealed to aesthetic pleasure while it paid homage scientific curiosity.



**Plate 4: 5
Frederick Ruysch, *Preserved head of a child with lace collar*
Kunstkammer of Peter the Great**

Among the most impassioned collectors was Peter the Great of Russia (1672-1725), who sought living and dead anomalies of human development. His *Kunstkammer* held, as well as a four-legged rooster and a two-headed sheep, the bones of the giant Bourgeois who had served as his personal footman.¹⁴⁰ It was not unusual for persons of abnormal physiology to be employed as gallery attendants as well as curiosities in their own right.¹⁴¹

The *Kunstkammer* also contained the entire collection of the Dutch chemist and anatomist Fredrick Ruysch. This meticulous embalmer and preparator had preserved the exquisite heads and limbs of dead babies, lovingly adorned them with flowers, lacy bonnets and cuffs and set them afloat in formaldehyde serenity (Plate 4: 5). Ruysch had perfected a technique for the preservation of specimens using a secret mixture of wax, resin, talcum and cinnabar pigment.¹⁴² His phantasmagorical tableau made from foetal skeletons arranged in landscapes formed from preserved body organs, veins and arteries were allegories of death and the transience of life. The value of such rare (and lurid) specimens increased throughout the eighteenth century as city and national museums competed for the finest treasures from private curiosity cabinets to add to their own grandiose exhibitions.¹⁴³

The emerging humanism of the Renaissance had further consequences for the display of disabled individuals as curiosities. Aristotle's suggestion, for instance, that an abnormal birth was a joke of nature (*lusus naturae*) was revived,

¹⁴⁰ Rosamond Wolff Purcell and Stephen Jay Gould, *Finders, Keepers: Eight Collectors* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1992). 19-20

¹⁴¹ Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century*. 25 There is a record of a dwarf brother and sister in dual role of attendant/curiosity in the cabinet of Ferdinando Cospì

¹⁴² Rosamond Wolff Purcell and Stephen Jay Gould, *Finders, Keepers: Eight Collectors* 21

¹⁴³ Wilson, "Eighteenth Century Monsters and Nineteenth Century Freaks: Reading the Maternally Marked Child." 7

vindicating the exhibition of human oddities for the entertainment of the people. Similarly, as revealed in the entourage attending the Infanta in the *Las Meninas* by Velázquez, the genetically disabled were adopted like pets in wealthy households.¹⁴⁴ Rather than a source of medieval horror, abnormality was treated as a source of amusement and, like the physical marvels in Witkin's photographs, resulted in the objectification of the disabled individual. Monsters were reinvented as freaks, commodities offered for exhibition like other animals in fairs, the back rooms of taverns and coffee houses and, later, as the professional freaks of Barnum's circus. These unfortunate individuals were displayed without understanding or compassion, just freaks and sideshow exhibits.

Bakhtin argued that the medieval grotesque of marginality and carnival laughter represented a powerful transgressive power '*lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract...to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity*'.¹⁴⁵ Was this power diminished when the religiously-constructed monster was reduced to the medical phenomenon of a freak of nature?

The well-known case of Joseph Merrick (1862-1890), the Elephant Man, demonstrates how his abnormality initially generated awe: horror, disgust and '*the loathing insinuation of a man being changed into an animal*'.¹⁴⁶ Merrick's physical disfigurement culminated in ambivalent identity: was he a human/animal hybrid, a creature of metamorphosis, or a bestial human being? The narrative of his reinvention as a sensitive and intelligent human trapped within a body distorted by a medically-diagnosed condition leaves him more pitiable than awesome. His

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 6 Witkin's *Las Meninas (After Velázquez)* 1987 shows a disabled Infanta Margarita rather than the two dwarfs of Velázquez's painting

¹⁴⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 19-20

¹⁴⁶ Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*. 177 quoting from the memoirs of Merrick's physician, Frederick Treves *The Elephant Man and other reminiscences* (1923).

misshapen body remains vulnerable to the voyeuristic desire to scrutinise his otherness: he is treated as a freak whether in sideshow or medical institute.¹⁴⁷

The 19th century was focused upon reading, prognosticating, and satirising the personalities inside peculiarly deformed bodies. Grasping the opportunity to capitalise on the voyeuristic appetites of the so-called normal-bodied, entrepreneurs quickly took to exhibiting the abnormally distorted and exotic in freak shows. For the performers, this provided a means of earning a living; some even found wealth and fame although, for many working in less affluent establishments, it meant exploitation. The marginalised world in which these people lived and worked developed as a culture in its own right. In the world of the carney, freak was not a derogatory term: rather, it was inclusive, the preferred term among the exhibits themselves. The outsiders were the marks, rubes, suckers, or yokels who were roped in by the invitation to 'step right up and be amazed.'¹⁴⁸ This attitude marks the carnival performers' attempt to reclaim the power to subvert established order.

Alternative euphemisms used to describe deformity suggest that the freak should identify with disability and hence need to be pitied.¹⁴⁹ As Leslie Fiedler, author of *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* confesses:

*I should be searching for some other term, less tarnished and offensive. God knows, there are plenty: oddities, malformations, abnormalities, anomalies, mutants, mistakes of nature, monsters, monstrosities, sports, "strange people," "very special people," and phenomenes.*¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Merrick's tragic life continues to be exploited in literature, theatre and film. Merrick's skeleton is preserved and on display at The Royal London Hospital. Michael Howell and Peter Ford, *The True History of the Elephant Man* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1980), 182-84.

¹⁴⁸ Robert Bogdan "The Social Construction of Freaks" in Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). 25

¹⁴⁹ David A. Gerber, "The 'Careers of People Exhibited'", *Ibid.* 38-54

¹⁵⁰ Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*. 16-17

In her article Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit, Elizabeth Grosz argued that the word freak represented ‘*an act of defiance, a political gesture of self-determination*’ in much the same way that other negative labels like queer were adopted by the gay community. She prefers it to euphemistic substitutes.¹⁵¹ The significance of Grosz’s article is its psychological analysis of the participants, freak and non-freak, in the performance. Grosz identifies the freak as a ‘*being who is considered simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening*’, a definition which implicates the uneasy participation of the non-freak in the relationship.¹⁵²

The perverse curiosity of the audience was a guilty secret. It was the voyeuristic, and probably unspoken, speculation on the performers’ sexuality that was masked in the kind of subterfuge that saw 19th century freak shows presented as morally uplifting and educational. Grosz’s argument that freaks ‘*traverse the very boundaries that secure the “normal” subject in its given identity and sexuality*’ is compelling:

*...the freak is an ambiguous being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life, interconnections, and reciprocal classifications, outside of or beyond the human. They imperil the very definitions we rely on to classify humans, identities, and sexes—our most fundamental categories of self-definition. Freaks are those human beings who exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition... Freaks cross the borders that divide the subject from all ambiguities and boundaries dividing self from otherness.*¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Grosz, “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit” in Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. 56 The chapter was written by in 1986, under the auspices of and with funding from the Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University. It was published as “Freaks: An Exploration of Human Anomalies” in *Social Semiotics* 1, no. 2 (1991): 22—38.

¹⁵² Ibid. 56

¹⁵³ Ibid. 57

The alarming nature of the freak is that an aberration from normal physiology generates a unique being with the capacity to challenge distinctions between, as Grosz illustrates, human and animal (humans with animal-like features), one being and another (co-joined twins, the superfluously limbed or headed), male and female (hermaphrodites, transsexuals) nature and culture (wild or feral humans), adults and children (dwarfs and midgets), humans and gods (giants) and the living and the dead (human skeletons).¹⁵⁴

In her introduction to the volume containing Grosz's article, Rosemarie Garland Thomson underlines the transgressive power of the unbounded body in that it "emerges from culture-bound expectations even as it violates them."¹⁵⁵ When defined in terms of aberration from the normative body, the characteristically monstrous body of the freak threatens the parameters of the imagined complete and self-contained body of normality itself. In other words the freakish body conceptually spills out beyond the definition of what it is to be human. As was the case during WWII when Hitler's regime enforced the sterilization and euthanasia of the physically and mentally disabled, it could be interpreted as a form of pollution, contaminating "a biologically pure population."¹⁵⁶ Bodily distortion and incapacity was thus perceived as abject, engendering disgust and self-loathing.

Witkin's photography embraced this repertoire of otherness and, reminiscent of the showmanship of sideshow alley, he capitalises on the allure of the perverse and morbid. He entraps the onlooker in the distressing cycle of sordid fascination

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 57

¹⁵⁵ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," in Ibid. 3

¹⁵⁶ The "Law for the prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Diseases," proclaimed July 14, 1933, forced the sterilization of all persons who suffered from diseases considered hereditary, such as mental illness (schizophrenia and manic depression), retardation (congenital feeble-mindedness), physical deformity, epilepsy, blindness, deafness, and severe alcoholism. Between 200,000 and 250,000 handicapped persons were murdered from 1939 to 1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Mentally and Physically Handicapped: Victims of the Nazi Era." Brochure ushmm.org

and guilty revulsion. Witkin assumes he is speaking for his models when, using the rhetoric of the abject, he fantasizes their emotions:

Through no fault of my own, originally, nature fucked me up. Then unimaginatively you cast me out. I avenge myself... To you I am a horror. In here I am part of a work of art. Here pain is figured as ooze and stain. Tricked out in pain I dwell in your excreta, a reject among your castoffs. I am dangerous. I am contagious. I am alive within all the signs of death... My ascetic immoderation mortifies you. I flout what horrifies you. I lacerate the self you arrogate. I am a way you will never be and by being that I raise for you the question of why, for no reason, you are the way you are. I make contingency shriek.¹⁵⁷



Plate 4: 6
Joel-Peter Witkin, *Siamese Twins* 1997
Los Angeles

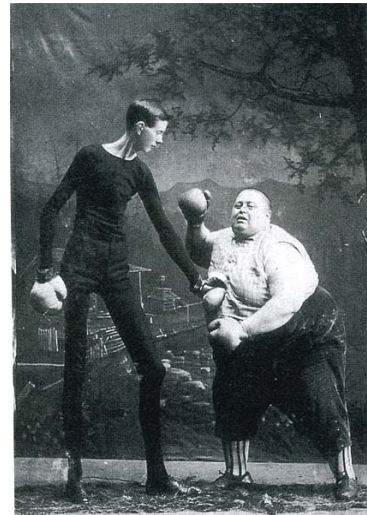


Plate 4: 7
Charles Eisenmann, *Human Skeleton with Fat Man*

He makes an infamous appeal for models of difference and otherness to reclaim their mythical status in the history of art and performance. By repositioning the malformed or maimed in appropriated classical settings, Witkin believes he is a conduit for the healing of these ‘*unusual people*’,¹⁵⁸ revealing their distinctive beauty. The theatricality of his highly staged tableau, however, often finds his

¹⁵⁷ Witkin, *Gods of Earth and Heaven*. Chorus

¹⁵⁸ The euphemistic term was used by Witkin in an interview with Peter Schjeldahl, *Shudderbug*, *The Village Voice*, October 31, 1995

models stranded uncomfortably in front of what seems uncannily like the gaudy backdrops of sideshow alley. In works such as *Portrait of a Dwarf* (2006), *Melvin Burkhart: Human Oddity* (1985), *Woman in a Blue Hat* (1985), and *Siamese Twins* (1998), (Plate 4: 6), where he dispenses with direct references to well known artworks, the static poses of the figures and the heavily draped background settings are very reminiscent of freak show publicity photographs.

Witkin's approach invites comparison with those photographs taken by the late Victorian photographer Charles Eisenmann (1850-unknown). These images focused on the freaks of the circuses, sideshows and dime museum exhibits of New York's Bowery area.¹⁵⁹ Eisenmann and his successor, Frank Wendt, produced promotional merchandise generated by the circus showbiz of the era, providing the performers with *cartes de visites*, cabinet cards and other ephemera to sell or distribute to publicists.

The work of Eisenmann and Wendt forms an amazing historical inventory, documenting the unique personalities of these circus folk. The catalogue of their customers reads like Witkin's dream list of models. However, their subjects are represented as performers and celebrities who often pose with the accoutrements of their skill or as contrasting couples such as the human skeleton beside the fat man or midget with giant. (Plate 4: 7) For the most part, they are not situated in pseudo-art settings but dressed in the fashionable attire of the time; their presentation is respectable and dignified rather than sensationalised. They are, in fact, posed in an identical manner to how portraits of 'normal' individuals and families were photographed.

¹⁵⁹ A selection of Chas Eisenmann's images are published in Michael Mitchell, *Monsters: Human Freaks in America's Gilded Age: The Photographs of Chas Eisenmann* (ECW Press, Canada Council of the Arts, Ontario, 2002). They are also available on-line from Syracuse University Digital Library <http://digilib.syr.edu/cdm4/browse.php?CISOROOT=/eisenmann> Further information is sourced through the inventory of the "Ronald G. Becker Collection of Charles Eisenmann Photographs" at Syracuse University

Contrasting with the practical, businesslike production of Eisenmann, Wendt and their contemporaries, Witkin selfconsciously draws attention to his own input. His freaks are elaborately adorned in masks, headdresses or exotic clothing, situated in symbol-stuffed environments and cluttered with pretentious art/historical references. Nevertheless, Witkin realises the value of nostalgia and, by adopting a process that ages the appearance of his images, he reinforces the resemblance to the cabinet portraits of sideshow folk of the late 19th century. His scratched, corroded and gnarled monochromatic images with their jagged edges stimulated the memory of a fictional time of magic and legend when the incredible, outlandish, titillating or extraordinary might be revealed inside a canvas tent.

Outcasts from mainstream society, the physically extraordinary, the transvestites, hermaphrodites, amputees and other exiles at the boundaries and edges of civility, found refuge in the freak show. In Witkin's tableaux, however, they are steeped in the atmosphere of an unreal fantasised underworld of ambiguous reality and grotesque distortions. He tends to romanticise their plight. He is infatuated with the outrageous, celebrating and embracing all the forbidden taboos against cadaverous flesh, bestiality, deformity and other such forbidden aberrations. Often described as offensive, repulsive, blasphemous and decadent, his macabre imagery is comparable with the fragmented world of Federico Fellini's *Satyricon* (1969) or the multimedia aspirations of Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002). Witkin, however, is confined to telling his story within a single image and cannot share the narrative and temporal advantage of movies.

The heyday of freak show exhibitions and travelling circus acts began to fade with the advent of the more narrative-based and accessible entertainment of cinema and television. The internet, moreover, provided a means to browse incessant sites dedicated to the display of medical anomalies and disasters and it was all easily available in the privacy of the home. Furthermore, disability and animal

rights protesters decried the cruelty and indignity of exhibiting both human and animal for the amusement and profit of others.

But just as the freak shows themselves were disappearing, the otherworldliness of the vagabond lifestyle of the bizarre performers themselves proved irresistibly seductive to the film and television industry. Bodily distortion had long been associated with the personalities in fairy tales and characters with dwarfism, like gigantism, consistently surface. Since its inception the cinema has embraced the fantasy genre offering so-called freaks employment and fame.¹⁶⁰

To conclude this chapter I would like to recall Tod Browning's 1932 classic movie, *Freaks*, where celebrated freak show performers play themselves.¹⁶¹ This movie is remarkable for its portrayal of the normality of the lives of the freak characters and for its insight into the horror that afflicts the 'normal' audience in confronting their own tenuous identity.

The movie tells of Cleopatra, the attractive 'normal' aerialist, who marries Hans the Dwarf in a plot to poison him and inherit his fortune. During the wedding feast the freaks engage in a ritual chant, 'Gooble, gabble! Gooble, gabble! We accept her. We accept her. One of us. One of us.' Cleopatra, horrified, refuses the communal chalice of inclusion and screams 'Freaks! Freaks!' Alerted by her drunken mocking of Hans, and her flirtation with Hercules the strongman, the freaks uncover her murder plans. Cleopatra is driven into the forest where a fate worse than death befalls her. She is crushed when lightning strikes the tree under which she cowers in fear of the vengeful freaks. She is dreadfully maimed. The

¹⁶⁰ One example is the actor, Warwick Davies who took advantage of his dwarf stature to secure character roles such as Willow Ufgood in the epic adventure, *Willow* (1988), Filius Flitwick in the *Harry Potter* movies and appearing opposite the evil Goblin King (alias David Bowie) in Jim Henson's fantasy film, *Labyrinth* (1995). Magic and marvel, it seems, is inextricably linked with dwarfs. Like dolls, their diminutive size allows us to suspend doubt, to believe child-like in the possibility of an illusive, allegorical and fantastic other life.

¹⁶¹ A synopsis of the plot (including the dialogue excluded from the final picture) can be found at http://www.olgabaclanova.com/freaks_script_synopsis.htm accessed online 7/2/2008

troupe can now truly claim her as one of their own: as the spruiker calls her, a half-woman, half-bird, her battered head wobbling crazily on a grotesque body. She has been transformed into a squawking hybrid:

*How she got that way will never be known. Some say a jealous lover.
Others, that it was the code of the freaks. Others, the storm. Believe it or
not, there she is.
In the pit is a creature with no human body beneath her head. A
feathered, bird-like belly bulges from her frilly circus jacket. She supports
herself on shaky arms, as Johnny did with more grace, and her face is
scarred, deformed, and has a dead expression. From her mouth comes a
wild squawking sound, in keeping with her chicken-like appearance.*¹⁶²

Therein lies the horror: the dreadful fear that the despised other is somehow malignant, contagious or threatening to a tenuous hold on human identity. Even as the viewers are spellbound, simultaneously fascinated and repelled, they experience vicariously the horror of otherness, fear their own vulnerability and are forced to question the security of ordinariness. Simultaneously, the grotesque body embodies both otherness and sameness. Ambiguous, the freak is the monster within, the bestial that is manifest within the humane. As Elizabeth Grosz reflects, the horror for the individual *'lies in the recognition that the monstrous being is at the heart of his or her own identity'*.¹⁶³

Deformity is an uncomfortable affront to what is normal in sexual, corporeal and personal definitions. It blurs the borderlines of human identity; it interrogates boundaries of the perceived self. It must be, as Grosz concludes, *'ejected or abjected from self-image'* to restore the parameters of human identity.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² From the script as transcribed by New Arts Library, <http://www.paradiselost.org/freaks.html> accessed online 7/2/2008

¹⁶³ Elizabeth Grosz, "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit" in Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. 65

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER V

Death: morbid fascination and the abject corpse

In the previous chapter I discussed the instinctive fusion of disgust and awe engendered by the anomalous, ambiguous and borderline flesh of deformed and disfigured bodies. As Elizabeth Grosz argued, abnormality challenged the *'psychical, physical, and conceptual limits of human subjectivity... marking the threshold, not of humanity in itself, but of acceptable, tolerable, knowable humanity'*.¹⁶⁵ She concludes that the freak is the measure against which the viewer perceives the boundaries of his/her own identity and, as such, must be abjected from his/her own narcissistic self-image.¹⁶⁶ The freak was thus perceived as a figure of abjection that could be marginalized, shunned, objectified and expelled. Exhibited in the ubiquitous freak show or in Witkin's photographic tableau, freakish otherness is effectively quarantined in a theatre of binary contradictions and dichotomies. This quarantining ensured that misshapen specimens of the human condition remain socially marginalised in a similar way to that in which the creators of the *mappae mundi* banished their monsters to the edges and margins of the known world.

In this chapter I focus my analysis of grotesque otherness on the closing stages of life: the dead or dying body. Terminal illness and death focuses attention on the inseparable connection between the physical body and the existence of subjective selfhood. As the flesh falters and dies the body is itself reconfigured as monstrous: this dysfunctional body causes the obliteration of its own self.

It embodies the disgust and loathing that is at the heart of abjection. The materiality of the diseased and dead body encapsulates filth and pollution, undermining the taboos that maintain its antithesis, the clean and proper body.

¹⁶⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit" in *Ibid.* 55

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 65

Abject threat to corporeal integrity, a repulsive purgative, it forces the subject to regurgitate itself:

*A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death...No, as in true theatre, without make-up or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit is what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death.*¹⁶⁷

Monstrous, the body in death is in the process of fundamental flux and metamorphosis. Beyond control, the body will decay and decompose and the existence of embodied subjectivity will dissolve into skeletal object.

When disease invades the body, when bodily functions and fluids are no longer controllable, when flesh is corrupted, then the body is imagined as monstrous. In *The Hour of Our Death*, Philippe Ari  s gives a graphic account of the objectionable odours and uncontrollable bodily excretions that drench the death bed:

*Death no longer inspires fear solely because of its absolute negativity; it also turns the stomach, like any nauseating spectacle. It becomes improper, like the biological acts of man, the secretions of the human body. It is indecent to let someone die in public. It is no longer acceptable for strangers to come into a room that smells of urine, sweat, and gangrene, and where the sheets are soiled. Access to this room must be forbidden, except to a few intimates capable of overcoming their disgust, or to those indispensable persons who provide certain services. - A new image of death is forming: the ugly and hidden death, hidden because it is ugly and dirty.*¹⁶⁸

Quarantined in the hospital, fortress of obsessive cleanliness and hygiene, the abhorrent reality is masked in sanitised sterility. Unclean and disgusting, terminal illness is indecently abject. For Kristeva the corpse is even more so; it is *'the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life'*.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 3

¹⁶⁸ Ari  s, *The Hour of Our Death*. 569

¹⁶⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 4

The corpse is verification of death and death is the darkest of ambiguities: of being and ceasing to be, of absence and presence and of disgust and longing. The horror of decomposition and putrefaction of the physical body is undeniably harrowing to already emotionally traumatized family and friends. It explains why preparation of the dead for burial or cremation is clothed in a plethora of taboos and cleansing rituals. As quickly as possible the body is concealed, the offending corpse is taken away, out of sight, off to the hospital mortuary or funeral parlour. If the body reappears it is only for a short viewing period where it lies in cosmetically-achieved tranquillity, arranged in a casket.

Yet, I might suggest, death should not be so unfamiliar; it has been rehearsed a million times. Last night's television news assailed us with suicide bombings, murders and road carnage. The killing continued in popular dramas. The cameras panned the corpse, ever so briefly, a few seconds: it was so commonplace. We probably stared, absentmindedly registering terrible, horrific deaths.

Photographic documentation of the dead or dying fractures the perceived timeframe of a long and difficult process into momentary incidents. In particular, the TV news reportage of wars and street violence registers only fragmentary moments of all the sensory and emotional turmoil of the reality. As Susan Sontag expressed, in *On Photography*, photography was '*note-taking on, potentially, everything in the world, from every possible angle.*'¹⁷⁰ Compiled as news bulletin, the mythic reality of an ephemeral digital image or printed picture edits out the real event. Whatever the viewer believes he/she is experiencing is filtered and distorted not only by the lens of the camera but also by editorial control. The viewer is passive observer, disconnected from the visceral matter, bodily wastes and other polluting sensations.

¹⁷⁰ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979). 176

The question then becomes: if illness and death is remote, impersonal and sanitised by overexposure in the profusion of media images, what iconography can express the abject extremes of death and disease? As I observed in Chapter III, during medieval times Pieter Bruegel the Elder drew upon biblical descriptions of the Apocalypse to depict a skeletal death on a pale horse in his epic *Triumph of Death* (1562). Plague had devastated much of Europe and ensured personal familiarity with both bodies distorted in agony and the presence of decaying corpses.

When the first cases of HIV-AIDS appeared something akin to this familiarity occurred.¹⁷¹ This was not a distant televised, anaesthetised threat; people in our city were dying. They were like us. We too might be infected. At first it was reported that a rare form of cancer was responsible for unexplained deaths amongst healthy young men. As the number of deaths increased, complacency was eroded. There was no cure, no preventative immunisation and no medical miracles to prevent what might become an epidemic, a modern plague. Medical ingenuity failed; doctors were as fallible as their predecessors were in combating the Black Death. The realisation that HIV/AIDS was being spread by the exchange of bodily fluids – blood, semen, saliva – compounded the panic. The mention of such abject bodily secretions was cloaked in taboo. The prevalence of infection within the homosexual community and among injecting drug users added to the apprehension that surrounded the virus. Fear engendered rumours and insinuation; even, as it was implied in some quarters, suggesting that the

¹⁷¹ The lentivirus, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), is part of a group of retroviruses that attack the immune system and can directly lead to full blown acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). In Africa and large parts of Asia the impact of HIV/AIDS has forced us to accept the virus is causing a global pandemic.

disease came as divine retribution against those who indulged in '*abominations against nature*'.¹⁷²

Further stigma was attached to those infected by the virus when a group of researchers from the University of Alabama claimed that AIDS originated when a slow-acting lentivirus, the Simian Immunodeficiency Virus (SIV), had at some point crossed the species barrier from chimps to humans. This probably occurred, they speculated, through the butchering and consumption of monkey and ape bushmeat.¹⁷³

Zoonotic infection was not a new phenomenon. A wide spectrum of parasitic or infectious illnesses including rabies, anthrax and the bubonic and pneumonic plagues are transmitted to humans via animal or insect bite or through ingestion or contact with the meat or bodily fluids of infected animals.¹⁷⁴ However, these infections differ from the circumstances described by the University of Alabama researchers. Slow-acting lentiviruses are known to occur in a number of different animals, including cats, sheep, horses, cattle and birds.¹⁷⁵ What is alarming is the possibility of a genetically-unstable virus migrating from any of these animals to humans and then mutating into a strain that is capable of human to human

¹⁷² For a discussion of the multiplicity of meanings that have been generated around AIDS see Paula A Treichler, "Aids, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," *Cultural Studies* Vol 1, no. 3 (1987).263-305

¹⁷³ Departments of Medicine and Microbiology University of Alabama, "Origin of Hiv-1 in the Chimpanzee Pan Troglodytes Troglodytes," *Nature* 397, no. 6718 (1999). 436-441

¹⁷⁴ Dr. Christopher W. Olsen, "Zoonotic Diseases Tutorial," (Department of Pathobiological Sciences, School of Veterinary Medicine, University of Wisconsin, 2004).<http://www.vetmed.wisc.edu/pbs/zoonoses/> , accessed August 2008

¹⁷⁵ Jacqueline M. Katz, "Preparing for the Next Influenza Pandemic," *American Society for Microbiology News* 70, no. 9 (2004). 412-19

transmission. The mutation of the SIV virus was such a case: it initiated a new strain of disease, HIV/AIDS.¹⁷⁶

Compounding the foreboding over the overt health risk is the stigma attached to any disease contracted from an animal. The fears and phobias associated with cross-species transmission of disease are symptomatic of cultural anxiety about hygiene.¹⁷⁷ Animal bodies, as hosts to zoonotic pathogens, are perceived as unclean. The impression is that this dirty animal 'other' in the form of viral mutation has violated the human body, jeopardising the imagined self as a stable and autonomous entity. This prospect reawakens the medievaesque phobia of liminality: the limits and boundaries delineating human beings are made permeable, indistinct. The disease is dehumanising. Consequently, it is a source of dread, monstrous and abject.

In response to the potential horror of the HIV/AIDS threat in Australia a controversial television advertising campaign was launched in 1987. The Grim Reaper was brought back to life... '*men, pregnant women, babies and crying children*' were confronted by '*a macabre and dramatic rotten corpse with scythe in one hand and [of all things] a bowling ball in the other.*'¹⁷⁸ In this *danse macabre* the bowling alley replaces the dance floor. Unlike the crudely-executed, cheap woodcuts that circulated a warning to the illiterate masses at the time of the medieval plague, the advertisement is beautifully photographed and sophisticatedly produced, striking for its B-grade horror film realism. Nonetheless,

¹⁷⁶ The H5N1 or avian influenza and the H1N1 or swine influenza have alerted the world to the possibility of a global pandemic see discussion in "Pandemic Potential of a Strain of Influenza a (H1n1): Early Findings," *Science* 324, no. 5934 (2009).

¹⁷⁷ Rabies, for instance, aroused the fear that the family dog would change into a bestial fiend whose bite would transform people into maddened animals. Susan Sontag, *Aids and Its Metaphors*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989). 38-9

¹⁷⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U219eUIZ7Qo> to view the video from the advertisement

how incongruous is the notion of the ten-pin bowling alley with its lanes crammed with grim, cowled reapers intent on the souls of non-vigilant innocents? This Grim Reaper maintains his place as funny monstrosity while persisting in a ludicrously inadequate parody of the anguish of death.

As a campaign to increase awareness of the serious implications of unsafe sex and drug use, the advertisement had an impressive social impact – mostly on the emotions of a not-at-risk heterosexual middle class. The Grim Reaper became identified with gay men and reinforced the implication that this was ‘the gay plague’. Victims were either ‘innocents’ – that is haemophiliacs, women unwittingly infected by adulterous partners, children infected at birth; or the guilty, namely male homosexuals and intravenous drug users. The plague metaphor increased the stigma surrounding the disease and incited hysteria and fear that somehow those affected by the illness would, directly or indirectly, contaminate everybody. As Susan Sontag emphasises, dreaded diseases are frequently *‘envisaged as the alien ‘other,’ as enemies are in a modern war; the demonization of the illness moves to the attribution of fault to the patient.’*¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Sontag, *Aids and Its Metaphors*. 11



Plate 5: 1
Joel-Peter Witkin, *Who Naked Is*, 1996

Against this background of angst, Joel-Peter Witkin's *Who Naked Is* (Plate 5:1) seems to parody the dreadfulness of death in the guise of jester, trickster or enigmatic judge. A heavy curtain is pulled back to reveal a melodramatic skeleton whose hand mincingly meddles with a set of scales. On the scales are two penises one of which the skeletal fingers appear to be manipulating in favour of the other. The skeleton and scales immediately suggest a connection with medieval symbolism of the Day of Judgement, and the weighing of souls and the phallus insinuates homosexuality. Is this a reference to the guilty and innocent,

the damned and the redeemed, or the morality of homosexuality itself? This skeleton is not engaged, like its medieval counterpart, in a *danse macabre*; here it relies on mechanical supports, as Witkin remembers, '*so it wouldn't just collapse like a rag doll.*'¹⁸⁰



Plate 5: 2
Joel-Peter Witkin, *Queer Saint* 1999

I suggest that the symbolic devices used in this image have been derived from medieval plague imagery and given a new interpretation through allusion to HIV/AIDS. This is corroborated by a similar image entitled *Queer Saint* (Plate 5: 2) where the figure of the skeleton, this time with a severed head, is pierced by

¹⁸⁰Joel-Peter Witkin, "*Danse Macabre*," *Aperture*, no. 149 (1997). Similar supports were essential equipment to restrain the movement of a sitter during the long exposure times necessary in daguerreotype photography

arrows. The clear reference is to St Sebastian, the saint invoked in medieval times to ward off plague and today adopted as the icon of homosexual identity.¹⁸¹ Ironically, this Sebastian is devoid of erotic muscular beauty, identified simply by the arrows, symbolic of erotic ecstasy engendered by sado-masochistic martyrdom.



Plate 5: 3
Copy of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Conjurer* c.1475
Oil on panel, 53 x 65 cm
Musée Municipal, Saint-Germain-en-Laye

Death, in *Who Naked Is*, is also the trickster; the viewer is audience to a magic act, a sleight of hand that tips the balance. The subject of trickery is familiar from medieval Flemish proverbial themes where, in paintings such as Hieronymus Bosch's *The Conjurer* (Plate 5: 3), the magician's sleight of hand diverts attention

¹⁸¹ Richard A. Kaye, "Losing his religion: Saint Sebastian as contemporary gay martyr" Chapter 5 in *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*, ed. Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (Routledge International, 1996). 86-105

from an act of thievery. Bosch's image warns against credulity and deception and, in all probability, evil disguised as something more innocuous.¹⁸² Witkin's skeleton also shows false sentiment: his free hand rests on his heart as if to swear sincerity. Meanwhile the 'more or less funny' skeleton of *Who Naked Is* is intent on his ominous task of choosing who will live or die.¹⁸³ His skeletal fingers echo the gesture of Bosch's *Conjurer*. Kristeva describes the abjection of the trickster:

*Abjection...is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sets you up, a friend who stabs you.*¹⁸⁴

In an article for *Aperture* magazine, Witkin denies *Who Naked Is* is necessarily about good and evil. (In actuality, towards the end of this article he goes on to pontificate at length about good and evil which somewhat negates this statement.) Rather, he says it is about food: '*What food is, metaphorically. It is alive and then dead and then reincorporated into another living thing...Even in death, do we ever stop wishing about life, emotions, and eroticism?*'¹⁸⁵ He goes on to liken the humour of the piece to a celebration of life like the Mexican Day of the Dead.¹⁸⁶ I am led to conjecture that Witkin's speculation on food and humour is indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the regenerative power of grotesque realism:

*...it was in the material acts and eliminations of the body—eating, drinking, defecation, sexual life—that man found and retraced within himself the earth, sea, air, fire, and all the cosmic matter and its manifestations, and was thus able to assimilate them.*¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² Elina Gertsman, "Illusion and Deception: Construction of a Proverb in Hieronymus Bosch's *The Conjurer*" *Athanon XXII* (Department of Art History, Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts Press, 2004) 31-7

¹⁸³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 51 Bakhtin's reference is to the skeleton as "a more or less funny monstrosity."

¹⁸⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 4

¹⁸⁵ Witkin, "Danse Macabre." 36

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 36

¹⁸⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 336

Food is a transgressive substance. Kristeva's concept of the abject was decisively influenced by the anthropological writing of Mary Douglas. In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Douglas declares that the passage of food entering and exiting bodily orifices violates dangerous boundaries and margins of the body.¹⁸⁸ Throughout the world, different cultures have variously ascribed polluting properties to food consumption and excreta and woven ritual and taboo around its perceived threats and dangers. Death is also entangled in this need to perform protective rites. Although many cultures offer food to the dead, it is the ability to consume food or not which marks the temporal limits of life or death.

A further connection with medieval imagery is that the mask worn by the skeleton resembles those worn by the infamous 'beak doctors' to ward off infection when visiting patients suffering from plague.¹⁸⁹ Witkin comments that the mask created for this image was to ensure that this was not a representation of a particular face. He sees it, he insists, as a kind of Everyman.¹⁹⁰ Although he demands the picture is read with '*sensitivity and an understanding of what the symbols could possibly mean*' he gives little indication (other than that the poor skeleton is 'basically effete') of what he considers its '*symbolic, not literal*' content to be.¹⁹¹

Bakhtin is much more helpful in interpreting the complexity of the mask. '*The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nick-names.*'¹⁹² Its connection to ancient rituals and

¹⁸⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, 2nd impression with corrections. ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969). 122

¹⁸⁹ Robert Muchembled, *Damned: An Illustrated History of the Devil*, trans. Noel Schiller (San Francisco: Chronicle Books LLC, 2004). 109 The beak was stuffed with herbs, vinegar, perfumes or spices to purify the foetid air when close to diseased victims.

¹⁹⁰ Witkin, "*Danse Macabre*."

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 40

spectacles 'reveals the essence of the grotesque'.¹⁹³ The mask protects and conceals while it transforms and disguises.

The Grim Reaper, who was so readily invoked to dramatise the threat of death and AIDS, remains like his skeletal relative from *Who Naked Is* firmly a creature of the earthly sphere that I uncovered in Chapter II.¹⁹⁴ The skeleton or cadaver is a human construct, a body in decay, not a supernatural being. Perhaps there is no need to conjure fanciful hybrid creatures and stories of uncanny metamorphosis to personify death if, as Kristeva claims, the corpse is itself the 'utmost of abjection'. The portrayal of death is monstrous precisely because a cadaver or skeleton is lifeless and yet in these images the dead are animated tricksters and adjudicators threatening to reveal the viewers' own monstrous transformation at his/her own time of death. The body that Witkin exposes, where dismembered body parts deputise for living models in classical portraits and landscapes, is more compelling than the hackneyed symbolism of the skull. Death means unbearable loss of self. The undead cadaver is utterly sickening, obnoxious, harrowing and menacing: repulsively abject. The cadaver is a reminder that the human body reverts to rotten meat. Burial or cremation, and associated death rituals and taboos, strive to let the dead rest in peace, their monstrous bodily disintegration safe from the ghoulish gaze of the living.

Witkin's photography arrests this process. He clothes his body parts in the trappings of high art, seeking to make palatable the dark side of fearsome enchantment. Gruesome cadavers are reduced to theatrical props and posed like resurrected zombies in elaborately contrived surroundings. Bits and pieces of the dead kiss (*The Kiss*, 1982), masquerade as snails (*Mask and Severed Genitalia as Netsuke*, 1987), substitute for the head of a dog (*Dog on a Pillow*, 1994) and, like the dead baby slumped amongst berries, grapes and pomegranate in *Feast*

¹⁹³ Ibid.40

¹⁹⁴ Chapter III, 49

of *Fools* (1990), stand-in for wild game in the sumptuous abundance of pseudo-Baroque still-life arrangements.



Plate 5: 4

Joel-Peter Witkin, *Prudence*, 1996
Toned gelatine silver print



Plate 5: 5

Mantegna, *St Sebastian*, c. 1480
Tempera on linen, 255 x 140cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris

Prudence (Plate 5: 4) is hardly prudent to pose naked but for her black gloves and elaborate head attire fashioned from two bats and a cadaver's-head gargoyle. The positive value of light is captured in the marble-like face and body of the beautiful young model and starkly contrasts with the negative darkness of the grisly death mask. The black shapes of her gloved hands visually link with the cadaver-bat headdress. Her right hand (like that of the skeleton in *Who Naked Is*) is on her heart and the left clasping a small asp, the symbolic deceiver. Gloves, another reoccurring motif in Witkin's images, are, like the masks, devices to obscure the intention of his sitters. Together with the seating arrangement, these

dark shapes might even be imagined as belonging to the cadaver as much as the living model. The blatant sexuality of *Prudence*, as exotic as a female nude by Ingres and as inanimate as a still-life, is foil to the animation elaborated in the headdress. In the background is a landscape that is a direct reference to Mantegna's *St Sebastian*. (Plate 5: 5) Once more, the saint is evoked in a photographic essay on the progression of human flesh from youthful beauty to disgusting dead tissue.



Plate 5: 6
Joel-Peter Witkin, *Anna Akhmatova*, 1998
Toned gelatine silver print

Witkin expects that his images will be read symbolically. In *Anna Akhmatova* (Plate 5: 6), his enigmatic homage to the Russian poet, he references her elegiac poem *Requiem*. Akhmatova wrote *Requiem* for the women bereaved by the Stalinist purges. These women gathered outside prisons walls waiting to hear the news of family members about to be sentenced to death or exile. It is a poem about fear, unbearable suffering, grief, mourning and memorial. Confronting

disbelief and raw misery, Akhmatova's personal pain in the imprisonment of her own son is universalised as a lament for all the people of Russia.

The severed arm in the Witkin image suggests the interest in cadaverous flesh displayed by the early 19th century studies of severed heads and dismembered arms and legs by Theodore Gericault.¹⁹⁵ The Gericault paintings have a disturbing quality that goes beyond the purely practical aims of anatomical observation and this would have appealed to Witkin. In Witkin's image, however, the reference to Gericault's *Anatomical Fragments* is complicated by other symbolic devices. The hand rests languidly on a mantle clock, its hands about to strike twelve. This is both *Vanitas* still-life, memorialising the transience of earthly conceits and pleasures, and a reference to a simile of Leningrad from the prologue of *Requiem*:

*That was a time, when only the dead
Smiled, glad to have peace.
And Leningrad
Swung from its prisons
Like an unused limb.*¹⁹⁶

Similarly, the flowers decorating the background tapestry may be a reference to another poem where Akhmatova recalls the vanities and ceremonies of life:

*I don't like flowers - they do remind me often
Of funerals, of weddings and of balls;*¹⁹⁷

The small statue of *Venus de Milo* is a headless version of Salvador Dali's *Venus de Milo aux tiroirs*, several small pieces in plaster and bronze created from 1936 to 1964, where the mutilated classical beauty is portrayed with drawers protruding from her torso. The allusion, considering the surrealist emphasis on trawling the deeper layers of consciousness, is that the drawers are entry into the suffering of

¹⁹⁵ Theodore Gericault, *Anatomical Fragments*, 1817-19, oil on canvas, Musée Fabre, Montpellier

¹⁹⁶ Anna Akhmatova, *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, ed. Roberta Reeder, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer (Boston: Zephyr Press, 2000). 384 – 394

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

Everywoman as represented by Venus, of the Russian mothers and of the tragic poet, Akhmatova, in particular.

This image is a good example of Witkin's methodology that he described as '*human participation after the photographic fact*'.¹⁹⁸ The emulsion on the surface of the photograph has been characteristically scored and scratched to indicate the distresses of time. The image is physically damaged and scarred, battered by life. But the uneasy, queasy feeling that plagues the viewer of *Anna Akhmatova* is triggered by the perilous proximity of the severed arm to a bunch of grapes: juxtaposing dead human flesh with food is *unhygienic*. It is unclean and improper, a cannibalistic mixing of two of the fundamental categories of taboo: food and death. Those who happily relish the flesh of other animals abominate biting into *human* flesh. Kristeva argues that a corpse '*takes on the abjection of waste in the biblical text.*'

*A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is undistinguishable from the symbolic—the corpse represents fundamental pollution.*¹⁹⁹

To consume the corpse is to step beyond the limits of *civilised* human behaviour. Even in conditions of extreme survival starvation, it would seem, is preferable to eating the flesh of dead companions.

The cadaver is a terrible mirror that foretells the future. All the vanities of the living are transient; death and decay are inevitable. Witkin's cadavers violate the imperative that the disintegration of death is better concealed. Perversely, morbid curiosity draws us in and teases us to seek a furtive peek at what should be hidden from prying voyeuristic eyes. As the essay accompanying *Gods of Earth and Heaven* explains, Witkin tyrannises the viewer with the vicarious need to look

¹⁹⁸ Witkin, *Gods of Earth and Heaven*.

¹⁹⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 109

at 'the lurid and the immortal'.²⁰⁰ For Witkin the cadaver is a vehicle to 'fantasize momentarily as the fate of others, the fate I am free of because I can look at, look on, look in, and stay out.'²⁰¹ The result is a nightmare that compels us to keep looking despite repulsion, fascinated into complicity with the intrigue.



Plate 5: 7
Joel-Peter Witkin *Interrupted Reading*, 1999
Toned gelatine silver print
Paris

The corpse in *Interrupted Reading* (Plate 5:7) wears an earring and pearl necklace but is not about to open that book at the page she has apparently marked. She has no way to comprehend literature as an autopsy has removed her brain. Is this parody of all vanity and intellectual obtuseness, or a sick joke? As an image where the dead engage in the activities of the living it is reminiscent

²⁰⁰ Witkin, *Gods of Earth and Heaven*. unpaginated

²⁰¹ Ibid.

of the frolicking cadavers of the medieval *danse macabre*. Bakhtin's adage of a 'more or less funny monstrosity' might also be applicable to Witkin's dead models but the dismembered cadaverous flesh in his images goes beyond 'imaginary uncanniness' to dwell upon, rather than subvert, the horror of death.²⁰²

Witkin imagines that he is creating 'a place where the spirits of the dead live on by sitting as works of art for their portraits'²⁰³ where he 'redeems the despised dead' and "transforms forgotten refuse... into icons of mystical contemplation."²⁰⁴ Despite his rhetoric, Witkin shows little compassion or empathy for his subjects. Unlike the woman in Corot's painting that inspired *Interrupted Reading*, Witkin's model is semi nude: the lustrous satin of her dress displaying her sagging bare breasts.²⁰⁵ Is this nudity, like the sensationalist exploitation of the dead, an outrageous attempt to titillate?

Witkin seems to have ready access to mortuaries and medical research institutions. The hospital morgue in Mexico City allowed him free access to the anonymous corpses dredged each night from the violence of city streets.²⁰⁶ The derelict and dispossessed 'considered by society to be damaged, unclean, dysfunctional or wretched' have no-one to claim their bodies and mourn their deaths.²⁰⁷ They have no-one to object if Witkin has 'the determination, love and courage it takes to find wonder and beauty' in the dregs of the underclasses.²⁰⁸

²⁰² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 51

²⁰³ Witkin, *Gods of Earth and Heaven*. (no page numbers)

²⁰⁴ Parry, *Joel-Peter Witkin*. (Introductory essay by Eugenia Parry, no page numbers)

²⁰⁵ Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Interrupted Reading* (c.1870)

²⁰⁶ Frederick Ruysch was appointed Doctor to the Court in 1679 giving him access to dead babies found in the harbour and to the bodies of executed criminals. Purcell and Gould, *Finders, Keepers: Eight Collectors*. 23

²⁰⁷ Celant et al., *Witkin*.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*. Those who understand what I do appreciate the determination, love, and courage it takes to find wonder and beauty in people who are considered by society to be damaged, unclean,



Plate 5: 8
Joel-Peter Witkin, *Glassman*, 1990
Toned gelatine silver print

Glassman (Plate 5: 8) belongs with these images, a 'punk' violated by street violence, and then neatly sewn back together and redeemed by autopsy. *'Don't wash him down. I want all the blood from the suturing,'* demands Witkin, and imagines him transformed into St Sebastian.²⁰⁹ His verbal posturing about the sacred in his images does not, however, disguise his objectification of his subjects. Witkin insists that he informs and gains consent from his living models, assuring them that he will make a photograph that is exquisite but, silenced by

dysfunctional or wretched. My art is the way I perceive and define life. It is sacred work, since what I make are my prayers." said Witkin once he was invited to the *Saturday Night Live*.

²⁰⁹ Michael Sand and Joel-Peter Witkin, "The Story of the Eye: Joel-Peter Witkin," *World Art 1* (1996).

death, the corpse is unable to dissent from the exposure of his or her cadaverous body to public gaze.

Witkin's imagery is undeniably compelling and horribly disturbing but his photographs do possess an uncanny beauty. His technique is intuitive and idiosyncratic, involving complex manipulation during the printing process as well as the staging of his props. These prints have a '*silvery, found-antique quality*' which he achieves by scratching the negatives, printing them through tissue paper, mounting them on aluminium, applying pigments by hand and, finally, covering the photographs with hot beeswax which he reheats, cools and polishes.²¹⁰ Comparison with other artforms, such as painting or non-photographic printmaking, shows how he has pushed the boundaries of his medium. In all, the images are aesthetically compelling and, undeniably, the viewer is hypnotically mesmerized by a glimpse into the forbidden post-mortem theatre – especially if it is disguised as artistic allegory.

Hence Witkin's subjects aspire to haunt with what Kristeva claims is the '*vortex of summons and repulsion*' that looms within abjection.²¹¹ Simultaneously fascinating while they repel, his images penetrate '*those violent, dark revolts of being...ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.*'²¹² Kristeva had proclaimed the '*aesthetic task amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking subject,*' mimetically opening the wounds of emotional trauma and elation and hence facing the abject by immersing oneself in it.²¹³ These images contrive to be sickening, a sublimation devised to control the monstrous abject, simultaneously tempting the viewer to partake of the voyeuristic delight of

²¹⁰ Cintra Wilson, "Joel-Peter Witkin: Is his darkly imaginative photography an intellectually camouflaged freak show or high art?" <http://archive.salon.com/people/bc/2000/05/09/witkin/> accessed online 2/12/2007

²¹¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 1

²¹² *ibid.*

²¹³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 17

gawping at the taboo corpse while feigning repugnance for complicity in an intrusion upon the dead. The photograph, like the television screen, anesthetises the reality of death. The viewer is not personal eyewitness to the gore of bodily dismemberment or autopsy, only the observer of documentation, safety compressed within a two-dimensional space.

Kristeva insists that in her estimation *‘that catharsis par excellence called art’* and *literature “raised to the status of the sacred”*, purifies the abject by unearthing the

...rampancy, boundlessness, the unthinkable, the untenable, the unsymbolizable...[that is the] untiring repetition of a drive, which, propelled by an initial loss, does not cease wandering, unsated, deceived, warped, until it finds its only stable object – death. Handling this repetition, staging it, cultivating it until it releases, beyond its eternal return, its sublime destiny of being a struggle with death...²¹⁴

Here she is suggesting the nihilistic purification of Platonic death which is not by any means the same as the corpse. The corpse represents waste, the garbage left behind by death. Witkin’s theatrical dressing up of his tableau results in a mocking pretence, a bizarre burlesque performed to enliven the abject reject, the corpse. His images present a grotesque scenario of necro-existence not unlike the medieval personification of death as a dancing or triumphant cadaver. Weighed down in convoluted narrative and symbolism, the result is that meaning is purged from the profound reality of death leaving only decomposition, hollowness and banality.

Today death has itself undergone fundamental redefinition. Mechanical ventilation can delay somatic death (marked by cessation of heartbeat, respiration, movement, reflexes, and brain activity) to preserve organs, tissues or other bodily matter in preparation for transplantation into another body.²¹⁵ Thus one body is being harvested in order that another can be rejuvenated – or at least has its

²¹⁴ Ibid. 23

²¹⁵ Kenneth E Wood et al., "Care of the Potential Organ Donor," *The New England Journal of Medicine*. 351, no. 26 (2004).

viability prolonged. The status of the two bodies – the donor suspended in an artificially induced limbo between life and death and the recipient contemplating bodily transformation by incorporating the foreign organ – is ambiguous. The transfer of body parts casts doubt on the autonomy of bodily parameters and reconstructs the body as hybrid, an amalgamation of self and other. The perception of selfhood becomes unstable, shifting and changing and hence ultimately monstrous.

In the following chapter, *Teratogenic speculations: the science of making monsters*, I argue that the horror of terminal illness and death and the desire to understand, prevent and cure embryonic anomalies has brought medical science to a position where an erstwhile imaginary monster is now potentially feasible. Through the biotechnology of genetic engineering, fantasy and phobia stretches into factual prospect. The concept of '*embodied identity*' as a self-contained, autonomous individual is being corrupted by manifestations of metamorphosis, hybridisation and mutation, processes akin to the means by which our medieval forebears imagined the demonology of hell. The medieval disquiet over mutant flesh that distinguishes the phantasmagorical art of Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel and Matthias Grünewald is embedded in the silicone bodies of mutant lifeforms of Patricia Piccinini's sculpture.

Chapter VI

Teratogenic speculation: the science of making monsters

In the last two chapters I considered the unbounded body made monstrous by deformity, disfigurement, disease and death. This monstrous body insistently magnifies the vulnerability of self-perception to the physical vagaries of bodily function. It becomes an affront to the notion that the human subject is defined by the supremacy of a disembodied mind over a physical body. This dichotomy, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, has persistently dominated Western philosophical thought where

...the body is what the mind must expel in order to retain its "integrity." It is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgement, merely incidental to the defining characteristics of mind, reason, or personal identity through its opposition to consciousness, to the psyche and other privileged terms within philosophical thought.²¹⁶

The grotesque otherness of an out of control unbounded body is its capacity to endanger its own life both literally and metaphorically. In this, the final chapter, I scrutinise attempts to slay the demon of physical fallibility: to contain dangerous malformations, aberrations and maladies of the human body by surgical and chemical correction or prevention. Because of her fascination with biotechnologies and transgenic animals, I have selected the Australian artist, Patricia Piccinini, as a case study in this chapter.

In an early work, *Protein Lattice* (Plate 6: 1), Piccinini makes a series of digital prints that pay homage to a hairless little martyr, the Vacanti earmouse that supplied the capillary system and blood supply for the growth of a simulated human ear on its back. The ear is not human nor is the mouse transgenic but it has become an iconic image associated in the popular mind with the biosciences.

²¹⁷ It sums up the conflicting emotions provoked by biotechnology: hope, awe,

²¹⁶E. A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies : Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1994). 3

²¹⁷ The earmouse was a tissue engineered prostheses using synthetic polymer structures on which to culture human cells that was developed by Vacanti in 1995. See Nik Brown, "The

loathing and disgust.²¹⁸ As Nik Brown deduces from a series of interviews with ordinary people:

Earmouse registers an improper transgression of the animal body as a species where the boundaries between the natural and unnatural become visibly disrupted, having a comic edge in this strange queering of human and animal anatomy...[earmouse is perceived as] an individual animal rather than species exemplar, subject to potential or actual suffering.²¹⁹



Plate 6: 1
Patricia Piccinini, *Protein Lattice – Red Portrait* (1997)
Digital C type photograph

Piccinini's stated purpose was to question the species integrity of all three players in the transplant: the mouse, the ear and the young boy whose cartilage cells were grafted onto the polymer ear form that grew on the mouse. She concludes rhetorically, *'the rat [her animal is a lab rat not a mouse] was merely a container, an empty organic vessel, a fleshly constituted mechanical process in a*

Visual Politics of Animals in Bioscience – Earmice in the Public Sphere," *Xenotransplantation* 13, no. 6 (2006). 502

²¹⁸ Ibid. 502

²¹⁹ Ibid. 503

technological activity'.²²⁰ The mouse/rat, in other words, was collateral damage; its life ultimately forfeited for the greater (human) good.

Piccinini's digitally manipulated photograph contrasts the artificial and the natural. Like a million other images in fashion magazines, the model is an idealized female immaculately made-up and airbrushed. Oblivious to the oddity perched on her shoulder, she wears the ear-rat like an exotic piece of jewellery. In this biotech era where artificiality is so much a part of the beauty business, plastic surgery and dental prosthetics have become commonplace. Is the little ear-rat a warning of a future of '*artificial flesh, chip nerves, laser lips, cloned organs, mutant DNA, vector images, and virtual dreams*'?²²¹

Profound anxiety accompanies the potential to reconfigure the body by genetic manipulation, stem cell research, *in vitro* fertilisation, organ transplantation, chemical modification, artificial life support and similar technologies. Ironically, medical science itself is accused of making monsters as virulent as the diabolical imaginings of medieval mythology. As W.J.T. Mitchell observed, in this age of rampant technological and scientific innovation

*...the re-animation of dead matter and extinct organisms, the destabilizing of species identity and difference, the proliferation of prosthetic organs and perceptual apparatuses, and the infinite malleability of the human mind and body have become commonplaces of popular culture.*²²²

Then again, irrational fears and prejudices have historically plagued innovation in science and medicine. By strictly forbidding post mortem dissection, for instance,

²²⁰ Patricia Piccinini, "Artist's Statement for *Protein Lattice*," (1997).

<http://www.patriciapiccinini.net> Official website, accessed online 6/02/08

²²¹ Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, "Tech Flesh 1: Resequencing the Human Genome Project," in *CTHEORY*, ed. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (Victoria: University of Victoria Canada, 2001).

²²² W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction," *MODERNISM / modernity* 10, no. 3 (2003): 486 Mitchell is referring to films such as *Blade Runner*, *Alien*, *The Matrix*, *Videodrome*, *The Fly*, *The Sixth Day*, *AI*, *Jurassic Park* and *Terminator 2*.

the medieval Church hampered the acquisition of anatomical knowledge.²²³ The body even after death was deemed sacred, its desecration taboo, but Leonardo da Vinci (1432-1519) transcended the ethos of his time in illustrating an unborn baby in the dissected uterus of a pregnant woman (Plate 6: 2). His anatomical observations showed remarkable insight into the function of the uterus and its membranes. Unfortunately, the image from the third volume of his notebooks (*Quaderni d'Anatomia*) remained unknown to medical science until the early 1900s.²²⁴



Plate 6: 2
Leonardo da Vinci, *Foetus in the Womb*. c. 1510.
Pen and ink from his third notebook
Windsor Castle, Royal Library, England

While da Vinci was applying scientific methodology in his research into anatomy and developmental biology, fellow artists like Hieronymous Bosch and Pieter Bruegel were still consumed with the painting of infernal creatures. The mystery

²²³ Peter M Dunn, "Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) and Reproductive Anatomy," *British Medical Journal, Archives of Disease in Childhood - Fetal and Neonatal Edition* 77, no. 3 (1997).

²²⁴ De Felici, M and G Siracusa. "The Rise of Embryology in Italy: From the Renaissance to the Early 20th Century" *The International Journal of Developmental Biology* 44, no.6 (2000): 515-21

surrounding embryonic life is not, however, absent from their imagery: disturbing creatures are frequently seen to emerge from the shell of a broken egg. Revealingly, it is the egg and its monstrous possibilities that informed much genetic exploration from medieval to modern medicine.

The egg has captured the imagination of mystics and scientific researchers alike. Symbol of birth, the egg also contained the inevitable ultimatum of death. Inside its delicate shell any manner of aberrations might be hidden: reptilian, avian, amphibian, fish, hybridised anomaly or monstrous deformity. The medieval imagination dreaded the monstrous, feared the birth of anomalous creatures and believed animal/human hybrids to be personifications of the demons of hell. With the empirical approach to scientific research that emerged with the Renaissance, natural causes of congenital malformation were observed. If monstrous birth was natural phenomenon, then scientific experimentation might reveal its secrets.

Early teratological research found the egg to be the most convenient of all possible subjects in which to observe embryonic life forms. Hence in 1605 the French anatomist, Jean Riolan, held claim that he was able to easily produce a monstrous bird by taking an egg containing two yolks, removing the membrane that separated them, and creating '*a small bird with a single head, four wings, and four legs*'.²²⁵ Riolan's experiment rightly affirmed that a damaged embryo was the result of interference with the normal stages of its development. Human intervention had *deliberately* copied the *accidental* aberration of nature. Riolan had inadvertently created a flesh-and-blood monster and, although the creature was not viable, he was prompted to ask, '*Will you say that what was artificially accomplished might predict something sinister?*'²²⁶ The mutation planted the idea

²²⁵ Marie-Helene Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993). 112

²²⁶ Ibid. 112-3 Modern teratologists retained 'monster' as a scientific term, therefore using a word which, through the centuries, had inspired many prejudices.

that the imaginary creatures conjured in medieval imaginings could actually be replicated by medical tinkering.

The artificial manipulation of embryos in the laboratory, teratology, was pioneered in the work of Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772 - 1844) and his son Isodore (1805 - 1861). Etienne, looking to prove the exogenic risk to embryonic development, believed he might hatch a reptile from an avian egg by altering the environmental conditions. While unsuccessful in proving species modification, he did observe a number of malformations including exencephaly, anencephaly and spina bifida.²²⁷ Isodore is best remembered for his taxonomic classification of all human and animal malformations by class, order, family, genus, and even species.²²⁸

The human ovum was discovered in 1827 by the German biologist, Karl Ernest von Baer, whose research had a lasting influence in comparative embryology.²²⁹ The work of the Saint-Hilaires was significantly expanded upon by Camille Dareste, a French scientist who speculates in 1877:

*...why not induce the birth of monsters by modifying the physical or biological conditions that determine the production and the evolution of normal beings?*²³⁰

Dareste experimented with environmental factors and their effects on embryonic development of the ovum (varnishing eggs, electricity, heat, magnetism, malnutrition of mothers). His theories questioned the role of congenital (hereditary) and teratogenic (environmental) agents in determining abnormality.²³¹ Dareste's ambitions for this 'modern science' led him to quote Charles Darwin's translator, François Vogt:

²²⁷ Sandhu, "Little Monsters: Deconstructing the History of Congenital Malformations". 6

²²⁸ Ibid. 7

²²⁹ Karl Ernst von and O'Malley Baer, Charles Donald, "On the Genesis of the Ovum of Mammals and Man," *ISIS* 47, no. 2 (1956). 117-8,

²³⁰ Huet, *Monstrous Imagination*. 113

²³¹ Sandhu, "Little Monsters: Deconstructing the History of Congenital Malformations". 7

*Menageries and zoological gardens must necessarily be transformed into zoological laboratories in which definite observations and experiments may be continued without interruption over a number of years.*²³²

Complaining of insufficient resources and lack of laboratory space, he makes the extraordinary boast that:

*I nevertheless succeeded in producing artificially ... several thousand monsters, and I was able to study most of the teratological types at different moments in their evolution.*²³³

Dareste's work, like Riolan's before him, was mainly on chicken embryos. Technological difficulties foiled his experiments with placental mammals and without access to those menageries and zoological parks he despaired that teratogeny itself might risk becoming an aborted form of embryology.

He need not have been concerned. Medical science continued on its divergent path away from the unscientific and with little respect for the irrational. Mythical and religious explanations for monstrous (malformed) birth were replaced by the rational methodology of experimentation and induction favoured by anatomists and embryologists. Developments in microscopy debunked the more peculiar theories and people no longer debated whether the spermatozoa or ovum contained a perfectly-formed miniature of a person yet to be born.²³⁴

The cell was found to be the fundamental unit of life. Science confirmed that beginning with the foundation cell – the fertilised ovum – a process of cell division was set in motion which ultimately led to the formation of a new organism. Chromosomes were identified and counted, their place in determining gender and causing genetic abnormality understood.²³⁵ The complexity of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) was comprehended as was the way genetic information,

²³² Huet, *Monstrous Imagination*. 115

²³³ *Ibid.* 120

²³⁴ Ava Chamberlain, "The Immaculate Ovum: Jonathan Edwards and the Construction of the Female Body," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 57, no. 2289-322 (2000). 290,

²³⁵ Friedrich Vogel and Arno G. Motulsky, *Human Genetics : Problems and Approaches*, 2nd completely revised ed. (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1986).25-82

inherited from both parents, combined to determine the unique physical appearance of each living creature.²³⁶

The dreams of the early teratologists are now materialising: the secrets of the egg have been revealed by the Human Genome Project. It is proposed that artificially manipulating the genes within a cell could hold the answer to world hunger and human disability; alternatively, the fear of a brave new world of hybridity and monsters lurks in a genetically-engineered future.²³⁷

In the remainder of this chapter I will concentrate on the intermingling of human and nonhuman bodies by biomedical technologies: the development of the chimera and xenotransplantation. In both cases the ambiguity of a corrupted body challenges the notion of a contained, autonomous self and the integrity of species.

The mythical Chimera, familiar from Greek mythology, has today lent its name to creatures created from interspecies embryos in modern scientific laboratories. The original Chimera was an impossible creature that exceeded the parameters of a single species; it was a monster – part lion, part goat and with a serpent's tail. The laboratory chimera with its intermingling of human and animal cells is monstrously achievable. In 1997 Dr Stuart Newman who, together with the social critic Jeremy Rifkin, filed for a pre-emptive patent on chimeric embryos and animals containing human cells, describes the chimera:

Such interspecies embryo chimeras are different from hybrids – organisms such as mules resulting from the reproductive mating of two different species. Interspecies embryo chimeras are produced by

²³⁶ Ibid. 83-163

²³⁷ For a statement of the difficulties encountered by bioethics see Michael S. Yesley JD, "What's Elsi Got to Do with It? Bioethics and the Human Genome Project," *New Genetics and Society* 27, no. 1 (2008). URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14636770701843527>, accessed online IngentaConnect 19/1/2009

*aggregating early embryo cells or ES [embryonic stem] cells of two or more different species and implanting them in the uterus of a surrogate mother drawn from one of the species. Whereas each cell of a fully developed hybrid contains DNA from both species, in chimeras the species identities of the descendents of the embryonic cells are maintained. The fully developed chimera is thus a mosaic of the originating species, an unprecedented life form that could not be achieved without technological intervention.*²³⁸



Plate 6: 3
Goat/sheep chimera (Geep)
Courtesy of Dr. Gary Anderson, University of California

Even though the ratio of one kind of cell to the other may vary, every organ and tissue is a mosaic of cells from both embryos.²³⁹ As can be seen in the

²³⁸ Newman, Stuart A. "My Attempt to Patent a Human-Animal Chimera." *L'Observatoire de la génétique* 27, no. avril-mai (2006).

Interestingly, it has been found that a natural form of chimerism can occur when a foetus results from the fusing of fraternal twins. "Nobody knows how common tetragametic chimerism is. It often has no outward signs and those who uncover their chimeric nature do so only by accident." See Claire Ainsworth, "The Stranger Within," *New Scientist* 80, no. 2421. 34

²³⁹ Stephen R Munzer, "Human-Nonhuman Chimeras in Embryonic Stem Cell Research " *Harvard Journal of Law & Technology* 21, no. 1 (2007). 124, Note 5

combinations of wool and hair on the sheep/goat chimera (Plate 6: 3), its outward appearance is also a mosaic of characteristics from each species involved.²⁴⁰

Creating a chimera from a nonhuman animal containing selected human cells, tissues, or organs was envisioned as having wide ranging potential for use in medical research. It is feasible, for instance, to genetically engineer pigs which possess hearts, livers, kidneys, and pancreases so humanlike in function, size, and shape and tissue type that people will not reject them after transplantation.²⁴¹ Similarly, nonhuman animals with humanised organs could be useful as model systems for research and clinical trials in studies involving, for instance, organ development, embryonic development disorders, and as models for diseases from cystic fibrosis, rheumatoid arthritis to cancer, as well as experimental drug trials.²⁴²

Against a background of scientific and medical enthusiasm for chimera research, Newman, himself a biologist and professor at New York Medical College, was concerned that these partially-human organisms might be used inappropriately: to harm the environment, to solve social problems through genetic manipulation or to be industrially manufactured for commercial gain.²⁴³ Newman was not

²⁴⁰ Carole B Fehilly, S M Willadsen, and Elizabeth M Tucker, "Interspecific Chimerism between Sheep and Goat," *Nature* 307, no. 5952 (1984). 364-366

²⁴¹ Ananda M Chakrabarty, "Crossing Species Boundaries and Making Human-Nonhuman Hybrids: Moral and Legal Ramifications," *The American Journal of Bioethics* 3, no. 3 (2003). 1-13

²⁴² Stuart A Newman, "Chimeric Embryos and Animals Containing Human Cells," in *United States Patent Application Publication* (2003). 4-5 The patent office began publishing patent applications online in 2001. *PGPUB Production Database*: <http://patft.uspto.gov/> accessed online February, 2009

²⁴³ The controversy spurred by Dr Newman's patent of the chimera is discussed on the New York Medical College website <http://www.nymc.edu/pubs/chironian/newman.htm>, accessed online February, 2009

See also: Newman, "My Attempt to Patent a Human-Animal Chimera."; Gregory R Hagen and Sébastien A Gittens, "Patenting Part-Human Chimeras, Transgenics and Stem Cells for

disappointed that his pre-emptive patent on chimeric embryos was denied because of '*the lack of clarity regarding the patentability of part-humans*'.²⁴⁴ He had no intention of producing a live human/animal chimera. His aim was to expose the ethical dilemma and stimulate public debate about the unpreparedness of the legal/legislative process to address such issues.

Consequent to Newman's protest, the possibilities and permutations of such medical technologies have aroused a miasma of ethical debate. Like the mythological Chimera, the biotechnological chimera proved disturbing, striking fear and even disgust in the popular imagination. The interspecies chimera undermined taxonomical boundaries. Neither human nor beast, it challenged the '*clean and proper bod*' of human integrity that can '*bear no trace of its debt to nature*'.²⁴⁵ As with the mythological Chimera, it is marked by monstrous hybridity. It poses the latent possibility of science gone horribly, recklessly wrong. This is a dilemma critical to thinking of the Australian artist, Patricia Piccinini. Utilising the expertise of a professional in film and television animatronics and prosthetics, Sam Jinks, Piccinini conjures an interpretation in silicone and fibreglass of possible chimeric lifeforms. Her strange creatures are uncannily believable and highlight the problematic consequences of interfering with nature. She voices her apprehensions by alluding to the breaking of eggs:

*Some things, once done, are not easily undone. We might recognise later that we should not have done them in the first place, however undoing them is not so easy. Like an egg, which once broken cannot be unbroken, when something is created, it is difficult to contain.*²⁴⁶

Transplantation in the United States, Canada, and Europe " *Journal of Law and Technology* 14, no. 4 (2008). 1-66

²⁴⁴ U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, Media Advisory No. 98-6, *Facts on Patenting Life Forms Having a Relationship to Humans* (Apr. 1, 1998), <http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/com/speeches/98-06.htm>. accessed online 10/2/09

²⁴⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 102

²⁴⁶ Patricia Piccinini, "Unbreaking Eggs," *Exhibition catalogue, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery* (2005).

Her ideas seem to have been stimulated by a fanciful but ethically challenging scenario suggested by environmental journalist Mark Dowie who, in his reporting of the Newman patent trial, speculated that the technology

*...could be used to manufacture soldiers with armadillo-like shielding, quasi-human astronauts engineered for long-range space travel, and altered primates with enough cognitive ability to ride a bus, follow basic instructions, pick crops in 119 degrees, or descend into a mine shaft without worrying their silly little heads about inalienable human rights and the resulting laws and customs that demand safe working conditions.*²⁴⁷



Plate 6: 4
Patricia Piccinini, *Natures Little Helpers – Surrogate (for the Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombat)* 2004
Silicone, hair, acrylic resin, leather and plywood.
Dimensions variable

²⁴⁷ Mark Dowie, *Gods and Monsters* (2004). <http://motherjones.com/politics/2004/01/gods-and-monsters>

Piccinini's practice is to exhibit works of video, film, drawing, photographic and sculptural pieces in concert with one another in integrated installations. Works appear at different times in different touring exhibitions, each with evocative titles like *Natures Little Helpers*, *In Another Life* and *We are Family*. She likes her creatures to interrelate with one another as in her 2005 exhibition *Unbreaking Eggs* at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney. Here she fabricates a biotech future where curious animals are genetically manipulated to be surrogate carers for endangered species of native animals and birds. The squat, fleshy body of *Surrogate (for the Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombat)* (Plate 6: 4), has custom-made pouches to hold the endangered wombat babies at varying stages of their development. She smiles her Mona Lisa smile, stoically accepting her role as mother substitute, her bulges of fat, her wrinkles and moles. If it were not for her armour plating curling armadillo-like along her spine, *Surrogate* would have been a very vulnerable creature. A sweet, gentle, if homely body, she could be a benevolent female goddess, a Willendorf Venus for the age of genetically-engineered parenthood. Piccinini's exhibition statement summarizes her concerns:

*Creation, birth, responsibility, babies, the changing nature of the environment and our relationship with it, the increasingly nebulous boundaries between the technological and the natural world each of these works explore these same ideas in different ways.*²⁴⁸

²⁴⁸ Patricia Piccinini in her essay accompanying *Mother's Little Helpers*



Plate 6: 5
Patricia Piccinini, *Natures Little Helpers – Bodyguard (for the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater)* 2004
Silicone, fibreglass, hair, acrylic resin, leather and plywood.
Dimensions variable

The leather-plated companion piece to *Surrogate*, *Bodyguard* (Plate 6: 5), is less benevolent, but he too is designed to watch out for endangered wildlife, in this case the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater. His gargoyle features and carnivore's fangs make him a formidable defender – but could his kind proliferate, cane-toad-like, to menace other vulnerable species? The riotous possibilities of the species going feral are explored in a series of photographs. On the exhibition wall two other naked rodent-like creatures – *Offspring*, cradling her baby, and *Progenitor* – occupy neat little leather pods while another creature leaps onto the face of a replica-Piccinini in *Embrace*, perhaps intent on protecting nature from all human interlopers, including the artist herself.



Plate 6: 6

Patricia Piccinini, *We Are Family – Leather Landscape*, Venice Biennale 2003
Silicone, polyurethane, leather, mdf, human hair
Dimensions variable

Piccinini's creatures seem to live in social networks, nurturing their offspring and interacting with one another. In *Leather Landscape* (Plate 6: 6), children, albeit simulated hyper-real sculpted children, adopt them as playthings or pets. These simulated children are uncannily realistic, obscuring the distinction between real child and replica, child and doll and animate and inanimate. The creatures, with their human-like gestures, beseeching eyes, devoted maternal instincts and gentle curiosity, irresistibly urge us to anthropomorphise them. Their apparent vulnerability stirs us to feel sympathy with the patient endurance of their lives. However, the resemblance of their simulated flesh to human skin is unnerving.



Plate 6: 7
Patricia Piccinini, *Nature's Little Helpers – Big Mother*, 2005
 Silicon, fibreglass, human hair, leather, studs, and diaper
 Dimensions variable

Piccinini's sculpture of a humanoid chimpanzee, *Big Mother* (Plate 6: 7), seems content to play wet nurse to a human baby. She is reminiscent of the 'humanzee', as the chimera of Newman's patent application became known. Her limp head of hair in overworked housewife style is a human touch, contrasting with her simian facial features, elongated arms and exaggerated sexual organs. At her feet are small leather bags holding, presumably, baby things.²⁴⁹ *Big Mother* touches on the quintessential problem surrounding the creation of human/nonhuman chimeras: their degree of otherness from or

²⁴⁹The Art Gallery of South Australia states that this work was inspired by the story of a female baboon that overwhelmed by grief at the death of her baby, kidnapped a human baby as a substitute, <http://www.artabase.net/exhibition/2131-big-mother-patricia-piccinini>. Accessed online 19/2/2010

resemblance to a human being. Either way, the conception of quasihumans and unnatural animals in scientific laboratories is essentially monstrous. The evidence that chimps share 98% of the human genome, and have a highly developed social, emotional, and cognitive life makes Piccinini's *Big Mother* so topical.²⁵⁰ Far from being moved by the chimpanzee's emotional and genetic similarity to humans, science has exploited them, using them as subjects for medical research.²⁵¹ If the animal is expendable in scientific experimentation what then of a chimera concocted to increase the biological compatibility between human and ape? Is it ethical to create a life with the sole purpose of making it suffer and die? Or, if the fusing of a human and chimpanzee embryo were to ultimately result in the birth of a being like Piccinini's strange creature, would its degree of humanness pose complex ethical and legal problems?²⁵²

Chimeric life forms are genetically engineered through tampering with human and animal cells resulting in a mosaic hybridity that reawakens memories of the physiology of monsters from medieval times. These modern monsters are creatures born of a mingling of cell rather than seed. They present problems of classification because of their peculiar otherness: neither one species nor another. The idea that species integrity can be violated transgresses the boundaries of what we had come to believe is the natural order of things.

²⁵⁰Chris Gunter and Ritu Dhand, "The Chimpanzee Genome," *Nature* 437, no. 7055 (2005). 47

²⁵¹ Professor Colin Blakemore, head of the Medical Research Council in Great Britain from 2003-2007, postulates that there is a moral boundary between our species and others. While he agrees that reducing the experimental use of the higher primates is a good thing, he considers that humanity's responsibility is to its own kind. In the event of an uncontrollable pandemic, he maintains that it would be necessary to perform research on the great apes. See Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer, *The Great Ape Project: Equality Beyond Humanity*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994). 312

²⁵² The moral, legal and ethical problems are raised in Jeremy Rifkin, "Are You a Man or a Mouse," *The Guardian* (March 15, 2005).



Plate 6: 8
Patricia Piccinini, *We Are Family - The Young Family*, Venice Biennale 2003
Silicone, acrylic, human hair, leather, timber
Dimensions variable

In Piccinini's *The Young Family* from her *We Are Family* exhibition at the Venice Biennale (Plate 6: 8), a family of transgenic pigs are so altered as to become an apparently new species. They hark back to the chimeras of mythology and folklore. Half human, half beast, they are a curious intermingling of human and pig characteristics: arms, legs, feet and hands have metamorphosed into human-like appendages with fingers and toes instead of cloven hooves. While the body and facial features of the mother are animal-like, the skin is flabby and wrinkled like ageing human flesh. The cute babies sport drooping ears and vestigial tails but their gestures and behaviour are strangely anthropomorphic. Nevertheless, Piccinini's creatures are idiomatic monsters, more bestial than human. Although she has conjured *incredible* beasts, this sweet little family with mother wistfully nurturing her young appears naturalistically *credible*. Despite her intention to reveal the aberrations of doctored nature, the gentle *Young Family* suggests that we have little to fear from the grotesque adventures of genetic engineering – just the introduction of a Disneyland of curious and benign new species. It is an uncomfortable thought that were such sweet creatures to actually exist, they

would have been spawned in scientific laboratories to provide spare parts for human bodies.

The transplantation, implantation or infusion into humans of live animal cells, tissues or organs, known as xenotransplantation, might also be construed as monstrous. The body of the human recipient becomes host to an alien implant. Procedures using xenotransplantation are currently a practical option and heralded as a potential solution to the shortage of human donor organs.

Even where human-to-human transplantation takes place, personal identity issues for the recipients are significant. The monstrous nature of the transplant recipient's body is one of the crucial themes in Natalia Lizama doctoral thesis *Afterlife, But Not As We Know It: Medicine, Technology and the Body Resurrected*. She establishes that

*...where bodies can be so readily opened up and living fragments shifted between individuals, the very status of physical integrity, and its concomitant illusion of individual embodied selfhood, are profoundly jeopardised... The monstrous then, within the context of organ transplantation, is evoked by the melding of what would otherwise be imagined to be irreconcilably separate: the self and the other.*²⁵³

In xenotransplantation, the other is a completely different species; an animal with DNA that, it is feared, could enter the human genome, particularly in germ cells, and thus be transferred to human offspring.²⁵⁴ The insistence of the host body that this is foreign matter infecting its integrity is apparent in the immune system's catastrophic rejection of any invading transplant. This is a hurdle that medical research is determined to overcome but the very measures used to combat

²⁵³ Natalia Lizama, "Afterlife, but Not as We Know It: Medicine, Technology and the Body Resurrected" (University of Western Australia, 2008).139 Doctoral thesis accessed online through Australian Digital Theses Program 20/1/2009

²⁵⁴ Sykes, d'Apice, and Sandrin, "The Ethics of Xenotransplantation: Position Paper of the Ethics Committee of the International Xenotransplantation Association." 200; "Xeno" is the Greek work for "foreign" or "strange." David K. C. Cooper, Bernd Gollackner, and David H. Sachs, "Will the Pig Solve the Backlog?," *Annual Review of Medicine* 53 (2002).133-147

rejection, the use of immunosuppressant drugs, together with the genetic modification of the animal donors, make the human recipients vulnerable to infection by retroviruses endogenous to the donor animal species.²⁵⁵ Viral crossing of the species barrier, as has already been seen with HIV-AIDS, creates its own demons: the spectre of a new and uncontrollable influenza, a Black Death spreading over the earth.²⁵⁶

Transmission of viral pathogens is more likely to occur between closely-related species such as humans and primates and this, combined with ethical consideration of using nonhuman primates (especially those on the endangered wildlife list) with complex social behaviours, such as chimpanzees, has essentially ruled them out as useable organ sources. Because of their greater phylogenetic distance from humans and the ability to breed them in sufficiently large numbers in specific pathogen-free, closed colonies, pigs are considered a less risky alternative.²⁵⁷ Scientists speculate that the organs of a transgenic pig would have superior genetic compatibility with the human body especially as the internal organs of pigs are also considered physiologically and anatomically similar to

²⁵⁵ Sykes, d'Apice, and Sandrin, "The Ethics of Xenotransplantation: Position Paper of the Ethics Committee of the International Xenotransplantation Association." 196-7

²⁵⁶ Concern has been raised, however, with regard to the transfer of porcine endogenous retroviruses (PERVs) (42–44). These retroviruses, which make up approximately 1% of the genome of every pig cell, are similar to human endogenous retroviruses (HERVs), which are present in all human cells. Although there is no evidence that PERVs or HERVs cause significant health problems in the pig or the human, respectively, concern has been raised that the transfer of a PERV (which will inevitably be transplanted with the pig organ) may cause health problems in the human recipient. Potentially, a PERV may mutate or PERV elements may combine with HERV elements to form a new virus that may be pathogenic to humans and/or pigs. See David K. C. Cooper, Bernd Gollackner, and David H. Sachs, "Will the Pig Solve the Backlog," *Annual Review of Medicine* 53 (2002). 143

²⁵⁷ Sykes, d'Apice, and Sandrin, "The Ethics of Xenotransplantation: Position Paper of the Ethics Committee of the International Xenotransplantation Association." 196;

those of human organs.²⁵⁸ Following the birth in December 1992 of Astrid, the first transgenic pig, and then in 2000 of five cloned piglets named Millie, Christa, Alexis, Carrel, and Dotcom, transgenesis and cloning appeared to hold promise as a way to counteract hyperacute rejection.²⁵⁹ It is curious that the animals are given cute pet names. As with Piccinini's *Young Family*, there seems to be a denial that these animals are genetically altered to facilitate the harvesting of their body parts to repair human bodies.

So far, although there is proof that an animal organ can survive and function within a human being, the long-term survival of xenogeneic graft patients has not been achieved.²⁶⁰ Consequently, few modern clinical trials are being conducted on xenotransplanted organs. Because of easier control of rejection, however, transgenic pig tissues and cells have proved more realistic.²⁶¹

Susan Lundin's analysis of a series of interviews conducted with diabetic and Parkinson's disease patients, who had benefitted from these techniques, is written up in *Creating identity with biotechnology: the xenotransplanted body as the norm*.²⁶² Her results reveal the contradictory and ambiguous moral quagmire involved in incorporating animal cells and tissues within a human being. The duality of the responses is expressed as uneasiness with the unnatural technique,

²⁵⁸ Cooper, Gollackner, and Sachs, "Will the Pig Solve the Backlog." 142 There are, however, significant differences - in life-span, heart rate, blood pressure, metabolism, immunology, and regulatory hormones.

²⁵⁹ et. al. Deschamps. J-Y, "History of Xenotransplantation," *Xenotransplantation* 12, no. 2 (2005). 103

²⁶⁰ Ibid. 104

²⁶¹ Ibid. 104; However, heart valves from pigs, which are no longer living tissue, have been transplanted for several decades. see Margaret A. Clark, "This Little Piggy Went to Market: The Xenotransplantation and Xenozoonose Debate," *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 27, no. 2 (1999). 137-152

²⁶² Lundin, "Creating Identity with Biotechnology: The Xenotransplanted Body as the Norm." *Public Understanding of Science* 11, no. 4 2002) 333-345

of 'something animal contaminating my body', and the rationalization that biomedical intervention can put right the dreadfulness of illness and death. Unease is particularly telling in the words of a diabetic patient who had porcine cells injected into her kidneys:

...they are, of course, so diffuse and small that one can't know where they are, or what they are doing with us... tiny pig cells that I have no control over and that can pump something animal-like into my body.

The doctor's reply is equally telling:

*You have surely urinated out the cells a long time ago, and if not, we certainly don't transplant souls in this hospital.*²⁶³

Curiously, the patient is concerned with her embodied self whilst the doctor assumes that it is her disembodied soul which she feels is being threatened. Incorporation of the cells or organs of another creature highlights the arbitrariness of the boundaries defining the self.²⁶⁴ In something akin to metamorphic transformation, the diseased and dying body, worthless and abject, emerges with a renewed life expectancy – albeit with the aid of a cocktail of immunosuppressant chemicals. The body, however, is fundamentally changed. As foreign body matter fuses in a familiar body, two genetic identities are integrated in one individual and the transplant recipient is troubled with a problematic, ambiguous, hybridised, liminal existence, arguably a living monster. Unlike the physical anomalies described by Ambroise Pare in the sixteenth century, or the overt hybridity of medieval demonic iconography, this monstrous hybridity is not visible. The insidious intrusion of the biomedical monster is hidden inside the body, in the inner terrain of cells, blood and viscera.

Piccinini is ambivalent about the alternatively hopeful and fearful response to biotechnology. She contemplates the possibility of paranormal interspecies bodies but visualizes them as cute creatures that could easily be characters in a

²⁶³ Ibid. 337

²⁶⁴ Lizama, "Afterlife, but Not as We Know It: Medicine, Technology and the Body Resurrected".

children's fantasy movie. An insightful review of *We Are Family* by Kate Cregan and Christopher Scanlon decries Piccinini's

*...weird, sentimentalised mammalian beings [in] a world where we're asked simply to love and accept ever more strange and weird mutations of the (post)-human.*²⁶⁵

They continue to accuse Piccinini of *'trite postmodern calls to accept difference as a matter of surfaces'*.²⁶⁶

There is an irresistible temptation to make comparisons with literature and, even more relevant in this futuristic context, to cinema. Cinema as a temporal, oral and narrative medium excels in evoking the visually repulsive and explicitly grotesque. In the simulated world on screen, the phantoms that haunted the medieval mind are readily reincarnated: death is again personified as skeleton, ghostly spectre, vampire or zombie. Through illusion and special effects, apparitions of paranoia, fear and terror materialise as misshapen bodies, disgusting beings, shapeshifters, transmutations, doppelgangers, clones, aliens, the demonically possessed and all manner of demented monstrous hybrids.

Visceral organs, corporeal ambiguities, death, disease and analogous nauseating, disgusting substances are tolerable if displayed on screen and once removed from physical reality. The artifice of the cinematic experience filters out the disgust provoked by the object. By way of contrast, the portrayal of monstrous beings in a static sculptural work allows a space for contemplation. Unlike the scripted dialogue of cinema, Piccinini's interspecies chimeras focus attention on the plight of the genetically engineered creatures themselves. The lack of

²⁶⁵ Kate Cregan and Christopher Scanlon, "Review: Patricia Piccinini, *We Are Family* Venice Biennale 2003 Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo, Victoria 2004," *Arena Journal* 13, no. 71 (2004). 39. Chris Scanlon is co-editor of *Arena Magazine*. Kate Cregan is a post-doctoral fellow in the *Globalism Institute, RMIT*.

²⁶⁶ Ibid. 40

obviously gruesome substances synonymous with the abject does not detract from the disquiet provoked by her essentially monstrous 'others'.

Cregan and Scanlon suggest a more negative view of Piccinini's hybrids and chimeras. Moulded in the materials of cinema prosthetics and animatronics, their silicone and acrylic flesh acquires the "cold and slightly moist quality of a corpse." No matter how life-like they appear to be, they are essentially lifeless:

...the closer the sculptures come to looking alive, the more obvious it becomes that they are not and never will be. In their successful impersonation of life, the sculptures become flaccid, dead simulations of the real and Piccinini is, ironically, as abstracted from their creation as are scientists from the social consequences of the biotechnologies they develop.²⁶⁷



Plate 6: 9
Patricia Piccinini, *We Are Family – Game Boys Advanced*, 2002
Silicone, polyurethane, clothing, human hair
Dimensions variable

²⁶⁷ Ibid. 38

The exception, they imply, is *Game Boys Advanced* (Plate 6: 9), because it 'invites a far more complex, ambiguous response to biotechnology... [It can] be seen as a double-edged sword'.²⁶⁸ The boys are so naturalistic as to be mistaken as innocent children playing video games while their parents wander through the exhibition. On recognition of their artificiality, it becomes obvious that boys are not simply twins; they are clones. Like Dolly the sheep, cloning has accelerated signs of their aging and the 'oddly cadaverous' appearance of their silicone skin is entirely fitting: the boys are in the process of dying.

Genetic engineering aspires to dream, sometimes in a fantastical way, of biological perfection, of overcoming disability and disease and prolonging life. Inherent within its aims are the chaotic scenarios predicted by its critics.

²⁶⁸ Ibid. 39

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have been motivated to uncover the meaning of the slipperiest of all entities, the monster. I have been drawn to Jacques Derrida's perception of the monster:

*This graft, this hybridization, this composition that puts heterogeneous bodies together may be called a monster...it shows itself in something that is not yet shown and that therefore looks like an hallucination, it strikes the eye, it frightens precisely because no anticipation had prepared one to identify this figure.*²⁶⁹

Of course, for Derrida the monster is metaphorical; he is equating 'a monstrous mutation without tradition or a normative precedent' to an inaccessible text.

Derrida's philosophy has been likened to an atheological interpretation of the apophatic.²⁷⁰ That is, he acknowledges the inadequacy of language to express the infinite parameters of meaning and seeks out 'the trace' which John Caputo delineates as

*...the element of undecidability, the formlessness in which determinate forms are inscribed, a desert place within which determinate decisions – theological or atheological – are made, each checked and confused by the other, each movement disturbed by a countermovement, so that we do not know what is taking place.*²⁷¹

Like a preverbal trace, the monster emerges from the unthinkable void like a terrible apparition, unheralded and hideous, shockingly irreconcilable.

In *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature*, David Williams also constructs an argument that the monster of medieval iconography is apophatic, a sign revealing

²⁶⁹ Derrida and Weber, *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974-1994*. 385-386

²⁷⁰ John D Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida Religion without Religion* (Indiana University Press, 1997).

²⁷¹ Ibid. 57

*...God as paradox: the One who is source of the many, beyond being yet cause of being, present everywhere within the world while totally transcendent.*²⁷²

The '*deformed discourse*' to which he refers is the monstrous paradox, negation and ambiguity of the grotesque which is a fundamental critique of rational discourse. The language of the monster, he contends, symbolises the inadequacy of human cognition in containing the limitlessness of the real. Cataphatic or mimetic art aims to produce an accurate representation of the real world of things; the rhetoric and allegory of apophatic art is seen as heuristic and self-reflective, urging the mind toward negation of the affirmative, to transcend the limitation of its own discourse and reveal that which is not.²⁷³

In effect the monster wears the grotesque mask to better illuminate the sanctity of the holy word. This statement contradicts Mikhail Bakhtin's supposition that grotesque embodiment, as celebrated in the carnivalesque world of Rabelais' novel, represents a rebellious defiance of feudal Church culture. Carnival, like the iconography of demonology, interrelates with religious ritual. Nevertheless, Bakhtin illuminates the ways in which the grotesque body is envisioned through a '*thrust downward into the bowels of the earth, into the depths of the human body*'.²⁷⁴ Those sites of ingestion and expulsion where the natural boundaries of the body are transgressed – mouth, breasts, nose, ears, anus and genitals – are appropriated to convey the attributes of monstrous deformation. He reads the monstrous grotesque as the '*ever unfinished, ever creating body*' that celebrates its underworld of 'apertures' and 'convexities'.

For Michael Camille, the medieval reader occupies the ambiguous space at the borders, margins and edges between the sacred and profane. Such liminal

²⁷² David Williams, *Deformed Discourse : The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996). 4

²⁷³ Ibid. 8

²⁷⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 370

regions are dangerous and powerful. From there, concepts of transformation, hybridity, liminality and irrationality beckon an incredible array of grotesque and demonic beings. For Camille, bodily orifices and openings are emphasized because of their vulnerability to demonic invasion. Like Ruth Mellinkoff, he conceives the grotesque as forming a protective shield, operating by utilising like to repel like.

Although they were so integral to the spiritual thinking of their time, medieval monsters emerge from the imagination, an answer to the need to personify the awesome and the dreadful. The monster deciphered through *mappae mundi*, took its rightful place in the world, in death and in the afterlife. Artists like Bosch and Bruegel invented physiologies borrowed from the language of the abject stressing bodily orifices and protuberances. As Marina Warner describes it, the hell they portrayed was populated by creatures where *'everything combines and recombines in terrible amalgams, compounds, breeding hybrids, monsters—and mutants'*.²⁷⁵ The medieval demon is perceived as unstable, subversive, an inexhaustible shape-shifter with the ability to metamorphose and transmute.

The medieval monster shares many characteristics with Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject. It emerges as the embodiment of the *'in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'*. It comes from *'a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered'*.²⁷⁶ As the abject reviles the clean and proper, divulging aversion, repugnance, filth and shame, it simultaneously erupts as sublime inspiration.

*The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.*²⁷⁷

Hence, the abject encompasses the apophatic monster: as figurative sign, or metaphor, the monster *'refers to nothing phenomenally real, nothing that physical*

²⁷⁵ Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*. 35-6

²⁷⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 8

²⁷⁷ Ibid. 9

nature confirms or authorizes'.²⁷⁸ Like abjection that hovers '*on the edge of non-existence and hallucination*,' the nonviable existence of the monster threatens to transgress the establishment of '*identity, system and order... [It] does not respect borders, positions, rules*'.²⁷⁹

*Prayers, laws, constitutions, works of art, all of our theologies and atheologies, are so many markings, configurations inscribed in the flux, so many figures carved in the shifting sands of the desert, so many ways of making our way through an aporia.*²⁸⁰

In its apophatic form, the monster emerges as a powerful metaphor whose grotesque otherness points towards sacred or narrative revelation. Alternatively, the monster can be perceived as a literal rather than symbolic entity. In its literal form, the monster is alleged to be embodied in the grotesque otherness that characterises the deformed, disabled, diseased or dead body. This monster materialises as a medical phenomenon making an early appearance in the miserable character that is in the process of metamorphosis in the *Temptation of St. Anthony* panel of Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece (Plate 3: 9).

In her essay *Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit*, Elizabeth Grosz detects the threat to subjective identity in an unbounded body that has exceeded its '*acceptable, tolerable, knowable*' limits. In its presentation as '*simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening*,' the anomalous anatomy of the deformed or disfigured body bears the insignia of the abject: the confusion and ambiguity of taxonomic boundaries.²⁸¹ Like the corpse infecting life from which Kristeva recoiled, anomalous bodies hint at the intolerable insecurity of subjective identity: the normal subject recognises his/her self in otherness, a realisation that must be purged from self-image to reinstate

²⁷⁸ Williams, *Deformed Discourse : The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. p12

²⁷⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 2-4

²⁸⁰ Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida Religion without Religion*. 57

²⁸¹ Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. 57

the '*clean and proper*' self.²⁸² It is not by accident that medieval monsters mirror many of the actual grotesqueries of abnormal birth.

Exemplifying the macabre titillation of '*the simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening*' dualities of monstrous deviation are Joel-Peter Witkin's photographic tableaux. Peopled by freaks and partially-dissected cadavers posed in mock art historical settings, they present death and disability as earthbound, referring to nothing other than a mimetic replication of objective existence: that is, the corpse, the disabled individual and the artwork.

Today, science fiction interacts with science fact. Monsters in the visual arts are ever more realistically portrayed as impressive hybrids extrapolated from medieval iconography while medical science confronts the monsters of deformity, disfigurement, disease and death with biotechnologies embedded with their own improbable inconsistencies. The monstrous body of medieval religion has been reconfigured as an increasingly medical/scientific phenomenon preoccupied with eradication and cure, investigation and surgical intervention. Appropriated by medical science, *terata* are treated as invaders compromising physical and psychological wellbeing. Abnormality, disability, illness and death are read as conditions of abjection: distasteful reminders of fallible flesh, misshapen anomalies, and vile bodily excretions.

Inherent within the promise of medical biotechnology, is the disquietening thought that medicine is encroaching upon the territory of religious deliverance. Through transplantation surgery, for instance, the viscera and intrinsic cells of the corpse, the utmost of abjection, are being assimilated within another living body giving fragments of the deceased body a kind of life beyond death. That is, a transplanted heart or kidney may live on in a host body even as the remnant donor body decomposes in its grave. In this uncanny sense, transplantation

²⁸² Elizabeth Grosz, "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as, at the Limit," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York UP, 1996). 65

mirrors the sphere beyond death of the medieval *mappae mundi*: not the eternal life imagined by medieval mystics but a medically-inspired denial of death.

To borrow a phrase from the analyst of science fiction, Donna Haraway, monsters are '*inappropriate/d others*'.²⁸³ The body that was once conceived of as a protective shell encapsulating an integrated selfhood ingests the foreign body fragment and, despite enormous effort to prevent it happening, attempts to reject it. This lifesaving process is then abject: the transplant transgresses the boundaries of the self. Margrit Shildrick's observation in consideration of conjoined twins could equally apply to the transplant recipient

*...the corporeal ambiguity and fluidity, the troublesome lack of fixed definition, the refusal to be either one thing or the other, that marks the monstrous [body] as a site of disruption.*²⁸⁴

Xenotransplantation threatens to further obscure the concept of an impermeable barrier distinguishing the human race from the remainder of the animal kingdom.

The interspecies chimera is arguably a monster in the flesh. Particularly when human cells are introduced into animal embryos, contentious ethical issues are raised. The mingling of species in both the chimera with its humanised organs, tissue and cells and the human body altered by transplanted 'animal spare parts', are evocative of medieval imaginings of the hybridity of monstrous beings. The chimera itself acquires religious meaning, feasibly bred as a sacrificial beast, its ambiguous body an offering on the altar of human deliverance. The debate as to whether the mantichora possessed a soul because its human head suggested the capacity to reason is resurrected in the disquieting notion of a chimera with

²⁸³ Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/D Others," in *Cultural Studies* ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A Treichler (Routledge, 1992). 295-337

²⁸⁴ Margrit Shildrick, "The Body Which Is Not One: Dealing with Differences," in *Body Modification*, ed. Mike Featherstone (Nottingham Trent University. Theory, Culture & Society Centre). 78

human brain cells or the humanised bodies of Patricia Piccinini's *Big Mother* and *The Young Family*.

Nevertheless, when mystical imaginings are traded for scientific pragmatics, antipathy toward the biologically-achieved chimera is tempered by its perceived promise to alleviate human suffering. Its animal appearance and behaviour camouflages the more perturbing consequences of its defiance of the boundaries of species integrity. After all, human beings seem comfortable with exploiting other animals for food and research. Increasingly, the interspecies chimera is painted as a saviour rather than a harbinger of environmental nightmare. The chimera is abject but seems more pathetic than terrifyingly demonic.

Already the chimera is being embedded back within a recognised social order. Its physical existence requires it to be located amongst the literal rather than the apophatic monsters of which David Williams wrote. In the context of Derrida's monster it no longer '*strikes the eye*' and horrifies because of our unpreparedness to identify '*whatever could be terrifying in this figure*'.²⁸⁵ The Derridean monster must always be an impossible species, existing only as an imaginary figment, an extreme and, above all, evocative metaphor. It must always be inconceivable because once conceived it is no longer unforeseen and, having been identified, it forfeits its monstrous capacity to terrify.²⁸⁶ Derrida's own prediction is a self-fulfilling prophesy:

*...as soon as one perceives a monster in a monster, one begins to domesticate it ... to compare it to the norms, to analyze it, consequently to master whatever could be terrifying in this figure.*²⁸⁷

Monsters or monstrosity are about otherness and, as such, continue to motivate a struggle to give form to the formless, to explain the inexplicable or to make an image of the unimaginable. Normalising one monster, however, does

²⁸⁵ Derrida and Weber, *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974-1994*. 385-386

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid. 385-386

not placate the infinity of monstrosity as yet unrealised. The monster is a figure of the future and '*the future is necessarily monstrous*'.²⁸⁸ The carnival of '*becoming, change and renewal*' is always in the process of replenishment.²⁸⁹ As the '*species of the nonspecies*,' as the nascent '*as yet unnamable*' entity, the Derridean monster is continually transgressing its own limits: simultaneously creative and destructive, unstable, irrational, abnormal, incomplete or excessive.²⁹⁰

The volatile nature of the monster must be added to the critical components of hybridity and ambiguity in establishing a definition of the monster. The monster is elusive. Because it '*frightens precisely because no anticipation had prepared one to identify this figure*' suggests a high probability that the future holds unimaginable and unforeseen monsters.²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ Ibid. 386-387

²⁸⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 10

²⁹⁰ Jacques Derrida and Alan Bass, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge And Kegan Paul, 1978). 293

²⁹¹ Derrida and Weber, *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974-1994*. 385-386

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